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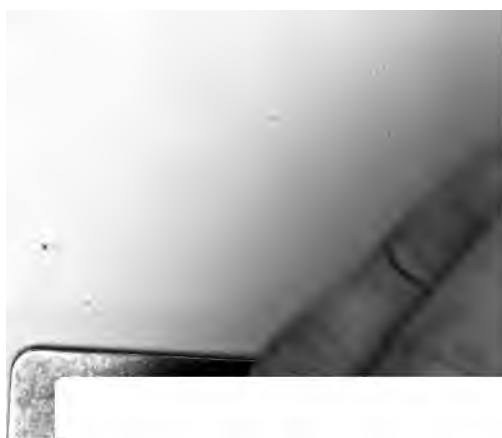
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LECTURES ON COWPER.

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PAUL'S WORK.

LECTURES
ON THE
LIFE, GENIUS, AND INSANITY
OF
COWPER.

BY
GEORGE B. CHEEVER, D.D.
AUTHOR OF "LECTURES ON THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS," "POWERS OF THE WORLD
TO COME," "WANDERINGS OF A PILGRIM," ETC.

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INTRODUCTION.

A SERIES of Lectures on the Life and Poetry of Cowper, delivered a few years since, became the origin of this present volume. On a new and more thorough examination of the Autobiography and Letters of Cowper, in connexion with the Poet's Memoir by Southey, the impression has been deepened of the injustice done to both Cowper and Newton by the tenor of that Memoir. The evil and the imperfection are in what is omitted, as well as in some things injuriously set down. The remarkable lessons of Divine Providence and Grace, the spiritual discipline through which Cowper was carried, and the manifestations of a Saviour's love to his soul, were slightly passed over, and in some cases misinterpreted and perverted.

The literary task-work of Southey, in whatever he undertook, was almost perfect for its exquisite ease and quietness, and for the good sense and truth of his criticisms, illustrated at will from the singular variety of his reading. But when he came to speak of personal religion, the good angel of his genius, if separated from the Prayer-book and the Church, seemed suddenly in gloom. Like Dante's guide, who could lead the way through hell and purgatory, but was not sufficient for the mysteries of heaven, a mind ever so cultivated and poetical may be unable to behold the things of the Spirit of God, and they may even be regarded as foolishness.

"Thou art arrived where of itself my ken
No further reaches. I with skill and art
Thus far have drawn thee on. Expect no more
Sanction of warning voice, or sign from me."

Dante.

Southey knew no more of religion, in its spiritual discernment, than Virgil, unless he had been taught it by the Spirit of God in his heart ; and if he had been thus taught, he would certainly have been more careful not to deride, or caricature, or deny, the work of the Spirit of God in other hearts.

One of the main purposes in this volume has been to illustrate more fully the religious experience of Cowper, and to trace the causes and the manner of his religious gloom. Some very manifest sources or occasions of its exasperation there lie scattered along in the course and manner of his life, which might have been removed by the wisdom of experience, and would have been, could his life have been lived over again ; but the secret spring disordered, the point and manner of entanglement and confusion remain as much a mystery as ever, and always will. The chords of the mental harp elude the sight, and so do the pressures that interfere with its freedom and melody.

The first dethronement of Cowper's reason being before his conversion, his coming forth from so thick a gloom an entirely changed being, a new creature in Christ Jesus, was so surprising a phenomenon, that it is not much to be wondered at that the world could not comprehend the scene. If Cowper had returned to his chambers in the Temple, and to his gay and irreligious life, they would have thought him perfectly cured. But it was as if some magician had come forth from a prison in the shape of an

angel, and it seemed a trick of legerdemain or madness. They thought it but a change in the same tragedy, the more especially as madness has its passages from tragedy to comedy, and from comedy to tragedy. Some said his religion was owing to his madness ; some said his madness was owing to his religion ; some intimated both, and would not even receive his own testimony, not even after the production of a poem of such consummate, bright perfection as "The Task" had proved that his mind was as transparent and serene in its faculties of genius and of power, almost as an angel's.

But the second access of his malady came on, a second and sudden dethronement of reason, at the close of eight years of angelic light and peace, and enjoyment in Christ Jesus ; and out of that he came as with a veil over his spiritual vision, or as one bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, or as one emerging from a fog, with the remnants of the thick cloud hanging to him ; and after that, he never could recover the brightness of his former hope, nor the joy of his first experience. What a strange and melancholy intrusion of the expelled delirium, when it could go no further, when it was cured, indeed, all but that gloom ! and what a *caput mortuum* of despair, left in the crucible after such a fiery trial of his intellect ! A recovery in every other respect, save only the delusion of a gloom so profound, that it produced the reality of anguish all the keener, because of the strong and undiminished affection of his heart still turned heavenward, and, like the magnet of a compass, as true in midnight as at noon !

His prevailing insanity, so far as it could be called insanity at all, in those long intervals of many years during

which his mind was serene and active, his habit of thought playful, and his affections more and more fervent, was simply the exclusion of a personal religious hope to such a degree as to seem like habitual despair. This despair was his insanity, for it could be only madness that could produce it, after such a revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as he had been permitted in the outset to enjoy. If Paul had gone deranged after being let down from his trance and vision in the third heavens, and the type of his derangement had been the despair of ever again beholding his Saviour's face in glory, and the obstinate belief of being excluded by Divine decree from heaven, though his affections were all the while *in* heaven, even that derangement would have been scarcely more remarkable than Cowper's. In the case of so delicate and profound an organization as his, it is very difficult to trace the effect of any entanglement or disturbance from one side or the other, between the nervous and mental sensibilities of his frame. There was a set of border ruffians continually threatening his peace, endeavouring to set up slavery instead of freedom, and ever and anon making their incursions, and defacing the title-deeds to his inheritance, which they could not carry away; and Cowper might have assured himself with the consolation that those documents could not be destroyed, being registered in heaven, and God as faithful to them, as if their record in his own heart had been always visible. We have endeavoured to bring into plainer observation the course of the Divine discipline with this *child of God walking in darkness*, and to illustrate some of the neglected but profoundly instructive lessons of the darkness and the conflict.

CHAPTER I.

The trials of Cowper's childhood—Companions and influences at school
—His own impressions.

THE birthplace of the poet Cowper, one of the few poets in our world, beloved as well as admired by those who read him, was in the town of Great Birkhamstead, in Hertfordshire county, in England. He was born in 1731, November the 15th, at the rectory of his father, Dr John Cowper, who was chaplain to George II., and rector of Birk's Parish. Cowper's mother died at the age of thirty-four, in 1737, when the future poet was but six years of age. Yet at this early period her tenderness and love made an impression on the whole heart and nature of her child, never to be effaced. It came out more strongly, as such early impressions often do, and perhaps always, when they are lasting, at a far later age. Near fifty years after his beloved mother's death, Cowper wrote "that not a week passes (perhaps I might with equal veracity say a day) in which I do not think of her; such was the impression her tenderness made upon me, though the opportunity she had for shewing it was so short."

John Randolph once said to an intimate friend, "I

used to be called a Frenchman, because I took the French side in politics ; and though this was unjust, yet the truth is, I should have been a French atheist, if it had not been for one recollection ; and that was, the memory of the time when my departed mother used to take my little hand in hers, and cause me on my knees to say, '*Our Father who art in heaven.*'"

How sweet a picture of maternal tenderness and care ! Sometimes, in the midst of darkness and despondency, in after years, Randolph would write, "I am a fatalist ! I am all but friendless. Only one human being ever knew me. *She* only knew me !" The idea of that being who knew him in the dear relation of mother, continued to be as a guardian angel to him ; many a time it seemed the only separation between him and death. Oh the power of a mother's love and prayers !

Short, indeed, was the opportunity granted to Cowper's mother to manifest her tenderness and care. Yet that opportunity was the time of tenderest, fondest love ; between three years old and seven or eight, a mother loves her children more tenderly, and does more for the formation of their character, than in any other equal period. And one of the reasons plainly is, because in that interval the development of being and of character is sweeter, fresher, more attractive, and original, than in any other. The poet remembered to his latest day, with the warm memory of love, that period of an affectionate mother's gentle and incessant care. He remembered his hours in the nursery, remembered when the gardener Robin drew him day by day to school in his own little bauble coach, carefully covered with his velvet cap and warm scarlet

mantle. He remembered when he sat by his mother at her feet, and played with the flowers wrought upon her dress, and with imitative art amused himself and her with pricking the forms of the violet, the pink, the jasmin, into paper with a pin ; the soft maternal hand from moment to moment laid upon his head, with endearing words and smiles that went into the depths of his heart. The pastoral home of his infancy, so dear for such inexpressibly delightful hours of the enjoyment of a mother's love, was his but for a brief interval.

"Short-lived possession ! but the record fair
That memory keeps of all thy kindness there,
Still outlives many a storm that has effaced
A thousand other themes less deeply traced.
Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,
That thou might'st know me safe and warmly laid ;
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
The biscuit or confectionary plum ;
The fragrant waters on my cheek bestow'd
By thine own hand, till fresh they shone and glow'd ;
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall,
Ne'er roughen'd by those cataracts and breaks
That humour interposed too often makes ;
All this, still legible in memory's page,
And still to be so to my latest age,
Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay
Such honours to thee as my numbers may ;
Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
Not scorn'd in heaven, though little noticed here."

The morning brightness of such a mother's love, the child, passed into a man, could not forget, though all things were forgotten. He remembered the sound of the tolling bells on the day of her burial, and his seeing the black hearse that bore her away slowly moving off, and the grief with which he turned from the nursery window

and wept bitterly ; and he remembered how the sympathising maidens, distressed at his sorrow, beguiled him day by day with the promise that his dear mother would soon return again, and how for a long time he believed what he so ardently wished, and from day to day was disappointed, till the expectation and the grief wore out together.

"Thus many a sad to-morrow came and went,
Till, all my stock of infant sorrow spent,
I learn'd, at last, submission to my lot,
But though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot."

Had Cowper's mother, so gentle, so affectionate, so careful, been spared to him, his course in life would have been very different ; but perhaps the poetical peculiarities of his nature would never have been so exquisitely developed. The *crushing* of the flower, which was to yield so precious and perpetual a fragrance, began in childhood. From the care and gentleness of such a mother, and the quiet of an English rural home so peaceful, so like an earthly paradise, the sensitive, delicate child was immediately passed to the discipline of a boarding-school. This would have been a desolate and cruel change at best ; but to Cowper, in this case, it was terrible, for there was in the school a brute pupil of fifteen years of age, who made himself the tyrant of the younger boys with unheard-of persecutions, and for two years the sorrowful and shrinking child was the peculiar subject of this wretch's tyranny and cruelty, until, the habits of the villain being discovered, he was expelled from the school. Cowper also was released, and for a couple of years was placed in the family of an eminent oculist, to be treated for a complaint threatening his eyesight. From that care and discipline he was removed, at

the age of ten, and was placed at Westminster, where seven of the most important years of his life were passed, in the study of the classics, till he was seventeen. His taste was cultivated, and his mind richly stored by these years of classical discipline, but his character was not resolutely developed, and some of the influences thrown upon it were evil.

Southey has noted as a fact, that in Cowper's days there were together at the Westminster School more youths of distinguished talent than ever at any other time were cotemporaries there. Some of them were afterward his intimate companions in the pursuits of literature, while professedly engaged in the study of the law. Coleman, the play-writer, was one, whose character, along with that of Lord Thurlow, Cowper drew with some severity, when they had both unkindly neglected the poet, on his sending to them the first fruits of his poetical genius—

“Thy school-fellow, and partner of thy plays,
When Nichol swung the birch, and twined the bays.”

In regard to the intimacies of his school-days, Cowper long afterward expressed himself to his friend Mr Unwin, “I find such friendships, though warm enough in their commencement, surprisingly liable to extinction, and of seven or eight, whom I had selected for intimates, out of about three hundred, in ten years' time not one was left me.” He told the same friend that on his quitting Westminster, he valued a man according to his proficiency and taste in classical literature, and had the meanest opinion of all other accomplishments unaccompanied by that, but that he had lived to see the vanity of what he had made

his pride, and to find that all this time he had spent in painting a piece of wood that had no life in it, and when he began *to think indeed*, he found himself in possession of many baubles, but not one grain of solidity in all his treasures. Yet what precious treasures did they prove, when at length, imbued with the sweetest spirit of piety, they were wrought into the most imperishable forms of English literature! Cowper's English style, like Goldsmith's, seemed part of the intuitive elements of his genius; it was not formed by his classical discipline at Westminster, but grew, as an apple-blossom grows out of life, by the *law* of life; for Cowper has stated in his letters some curious facts as to the general neglect of English in a school given to Latin and Greek. The very same lad, he said, was often commended for his Latin, who deserved to be whipped for his English, and not one in fifty of those who passed through Westminster and Eton arrived at any remarkable proficiency in speaking and writing their own mother tongue.

With merry playmates at Westminster, Cowper must have enjoyed many hours, notwithstanding all that he is said to have suffered, both there and at the earliest scene of his school-trials. Hayley tells us that Cowper had "been frequently *heard* to lament the persecution he had sustained in his childish years, from the cruelty of his school-fellows in the two scenes of his education. His own forcible expression represented him at Westminster as not daring to raise his eye above the shoe-buckle of the elder boys, who were too apt to tyrannise over his gentle spirit." Cowper's own description of this misery refers only to his experience at the school for children in Hert-

fordshire. But Hayley seems to write from the remembrance of Cowper's conversation, and describes the same torment as endured in some degree at Westminster. There can be no doubt that in such treatment of a mind and heart so tenderly sensitive, so exquisitely delicate, there was gathering, even at the earliest period, that cloud, at first no bigger than a man's hand, which was at length to overshadow his whole being with the blackness of a settled madness and despair.

The whole of his early education was certainly, in some respects, most unfortunate. Of his situation in the household of the surgeon and oculist, where he went at eight years of age for medical discipline, connected with the system of education afterward pursued, he speaks himself, in brief terms, as follows:—"I continued two years in this family, where religion was neither known nor practised, and from thence was despatched to Westminster. Whatever seeds of religion I might carry thither, before my seven years' apprenticeship to the classics were expired, were all marred and corrupted. The duty of the schoolboy swallowed up every other; and I acquired Latin and Greek at the expense of knowledge much more important." He speaks in this connexion of some early casual impressions in regard to his own mortality, increased by intimations of a consumptive habit, and attended with a lowness of spirits uncommon at such an age.

Certainly, it were a sufficient cause for unhappiness, not imaginary nor temporary, to be banished at so tender an age as Cowper was from so dear a home as his, and thrown upon the care of strangers in a boarding-house; and four

years, from the age of six to ten, spent so unhappily, are reason enough for that "uncommon lowness of spirits." Cowper was thrown upon himself too early, and with too entire an absence of any dear personal guide or friend, for the habit of self-reliance to grow out of such discipline. De Quincey, in some reference to the years of *his* childhood, says, "By temperament, and through natural dedication to despondency, I felt resting upon me always too deep and gloomy a sense of obscure duties, attached to life, that I never *should* be able to fulfil; a burden which I could not carry, and which yet I did not know how to throw off." This is a very common experience in boys of a reflective nature, though not always remembered and defined with so much distinctness. Suppose it were increased to a morbid degree by circumstances, it might easily become a predisposing cause of permanent gloom, assuming the type of madness. And this feeling, at a later period, was absolutely one of the *exasperating* causes of Cowper's insanity. If another human being could have been found to take the responsibility of life upon himself, Cowper's mind would have been at ease, and no catastrophe of madness would have happened. But, then, for aught we can see, his conscience would have remained at ease, also, and he never would have been awakened from the careless dreamings of an indolent, gay, social existence, as attractive, when its habit was once formed, as it was useless, but ruinous for his nobler and better nature. He was rudely and awfully thrown upon himself, and found himself the greatest of all burdens that the mind could bear; yet not till despair came, absolute

despair, was he thrown upon his Saviour, and not till then did he find rest.

He has described his singular religious indifference at the age of fourteen, when seized with the small-pox, and presumed to be but a step from death. And it *was* singular, for that is an age when, in the prospect of death, conscience is ordinarily much alarmed, and there is great anxiety, for the heart has not been hardened. But Cowper says, "Though I was severely handled by this disease, and in imminent danger, yet neither in the course of it, nor during my recovery, had I any sentiments of contrition, any thought of God or eternity." Cowper goes still further in the record against his boyish days—the review, from an advanced and holy post of observation, of the evil habits he was then contracting. He says he was hardly raised from his bed of pain and sickness before the love of sin became stronger than ever, and the devil seemed rather to have gained than lost an advantage over him. "By this time," he says, "that is, about the age of fourteen, I became such an adept in the infernal art of lying, that I was seldom guilty of a fault for which I could not invent an apology capable of deceiving the wisest. These, I know, are called schoolboy's tricks; but a total depravity of principle, and the work of the father of lies, are universally at the bottom of them."

Southey sets this down as a species of Protestant exaggerated self-condemnation, either hypocritical or enthusiastic—either to deceive others, or to promote the cause of religion by magnifying the miracle of one's own conversion. It is no great compliment to the character of Cow-

per, the Christian, and the poet, to intimate that he would deliberately and knowingly exaggerate the sins and follies of his childhood, even for the purpose of magnifying a miracle. It is no great compliment to his truthfulness to intimate that he would endeavour to set forth the miracle of his own conversion as greater than it really was. Southey thinks that Cowper imposed upon himself, when accusing himself as a juvenile proficient in the infernal art of lying, in a far greater degree than he had ever imposed upon an usher; and he adds, contrary to all experience, "that lying is certainly not one of those vices which are either acquired or fostered at a public school."

But how could Cowper, as a truthful man, have accused himself of lying in his childhood, if he had not remembered and known that he had been guilty of that sin? How could he impose upon himself with such a mere imagination, when he was sitting down to compose a severely truthful history? How, above all, could he deliberately attempt to impose upon others, or to record for others' instruction, as a definite, well-known point in his own early life and character, what was nothing better than a slander against himself? It is a most injurious and humiliating argument by which Southey, in order to avert the charge of depravity from Cowper's youth, fastens that of deception upon Cowper's Christian manhood. And yet Southey acknowledges that "Cowper was not one of those persons who gratify their spiritual pride by representing themselves as the vilest of sinners." The secret of the strange apology is in the next sentence, in which Southey, because it is certain that Cowper had been an inoffensive gentle boy, discards as not to be received in

evidence of any such evil habit as that of falsehood, "whatever he, in his *deplorable state of mind*, may have said or thought of his own childhood."

Now it can hardly be credited that the state of mind which Southey here sets down as *deplorable*, when Cowper penned his own exquisitely beautiful and affecting memoirs, and gave the history of his childhood, was the calmest, brightest, serenest, most spiritual and heavenly period and mood of his whole life; a state of mind in which the presence of his Saviour was a light of glory and of joy, and the very atmosphere of his heart was as the air of heaven. It was so far from deplorable for himself, that he was always in the enjoyment of the sweetest social and Christian communion, and in the almost uninterrupted exercise of prayer and praise. And so far from melancholy to others, that the very sight of a creature so exalted in spiritual happiness was full of interest and delight; for he looked on all around him with celestial love, and he judged all things with a serene, unbiassed spiritual judgment, neither censorious, nor harsh, nor gloomy, but sweetly radiant with the beauty of that happiness, through which every thought was transmitted. All forms of opinion, all sentences on his past life, and anticipations of his future, flew freely forth, like birds of Paradise, through an avenue of peace and joy, bearing fragrance from the trees of life on either side upon their wings. It was the experience of "the peace of God that passeth all understanding, keeping both heart and mind through Christ Jesus."

And yet, Southey had the hardihood to speak of Cowper, while in the experience of such religious feeling and en-

joyment, as "in his deplorable state of mind," and could say of him that "he regarded with a diseased mind his own nature and the course of human life," when he referred to the absence of religion in his own childhood. It is in the same mood that Southey speaks of Cowper's interesting account of himself as "his melancholy memoirs." Repeatedly Southey speaks of the "exaggerated language" of these memoirs in regard to their description of the native evil of the human heart, and of the total want of religion in Cowper's own heart before his conversion. In direct contradiction to Cowper's own solemn affirmations of what he remembered in regard to his own character and condition in his childhood and youth, Southey says, "He had no cause, real or imaginary, for regret or self-reproach. He was exactly one of those boys who choose for themselves the good that may be gained at a public school, and eschew the evil, being preserved from it by their good instincts, or by the influence of virtuous principles inculcated in childhood." Whose testimony, in such a case, is to be believed?—that of the author of the autobiography, speaking of himself, and speaking as a Christian, from a heart full of the emotions of heavenly gratitude and praise; or that of the biographer, contradicting the autobiography, and declaring that he knows more about Cowper's childhood than Cowper knew himself, and can describe more truthfully than Cowper has done the early life of the poet?

The passage in which Cowper charges upon his youthful character and years the habit of falsehood, is omitted from the autobiography in some of the editions of the poet's life and writings. It is somewhat altered even by

Grimshawe. And, indeed, it is very natural to wish that there had been no occasion for writing it. But we are not sitting in court, where the counsel and the judge will not admit anything from the prisoner himself, against himself, to go to the jury. Every word is precious. The "Jerusalem sinner," the happy, forgiven, rejoicing saint in Christ Jesus, was drawing up as truthful an account as he could give of his former and his present self; of his character and habits as a boy and a man, *without* grace, and of the great and mighty change wrought in him *by* grace; and we cannot but esteem it a false and ill-judged delicacy, which would suppress, or deny and contradict, such a passage as this, out of a supposed regard to the poet's memory. One might as well and as wisely suppress John Newton's account of his manner of life while engaged in slave-trading, together with his profaneness and the vices of his character.

The truth is, we would like to see, in the review of Cowper's early life, whatever Cowper himself saw, and judged it for the glory of God that others also should see and remark upon. If he had fallen into evil habits, his being rescued from them by Divine grace could not be known unless *they* were known. It is more to the glory of God, than it is to the disgrace of the sinner, that they *should* be known in every case in which the grace of God is so triumphant. The greater the guilt, the greater the grace and glory of salvation. "Howbeit," says Paul, "for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting." Paul says that God called him and forgave

him, not because his sins were small and few, but many and great, that he might give point and power to that "faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." And David in his very prayer, "For Thy name's sake pardon mine iniquity, FOR IT IS GREAT," expresses the same wondrous theology, wondrous and always new in the world, for its amazing mercy.

Let then sin have its full merit, as well as grace ; justice to the one is but justice to the other. No extenuation of human offences, whether in boyhood or manhood, can glorify God, but the manifestation of God's glory most powerfully sets off the baseness of every kind of sin, in every age and place. Set down, if you please, those equivocations, deceits, concealments, and false excuses, which Cowper rudely describes as the infernal art of lying ; set them down as mere harmless boyish tricks and strata-gems ; yet they shew the corrupting power of evil example in a public school, even upon a nature constitutionally so frank and indisposed to falsehood as the youthful Cowper's. His character as yet, while at school, was not firm, but irresolute and yielding, and he had no religious principles or habits to bear him through temptation unharmed.

CHAPTER II.

Public schools and private tuition — “The Tirocinium” — Cowper’s experience at Westminster—Cowper’s habits while a student-at-law —His residence in the Temple—His convivial and literary companions.

AN admirable judge of English schools in his day, Mr De Quincey, has expressed the opinion that Cowper was far from doing justice to the great public schools of the kingdom in his “Tirocinium,” or review of the school-discipline. He affirms that Cowper was disqualified, by delicacy of temperament, for reaping the benefit from such a warfare, and having suffered too much in his own Westminster experience, he could not judge the great public schools from an impartial station; “but I,” continues he, “though ill enough adapted to an atmosphere so stormy, yet having tried both classes of schools, public and private, am compelled, in mere conscience, to give my vote (and if I had a thousand votes, to give *all* my votes) for the former.”

So, too, as between the public and private *schools* that Cowper had attended, the proof in *his* experience was in favour of the former, for he suffered much more at the private school than he did at the public. But this by no means invalidates his testimony as to the essential evils

of the latter. And a system of education which proves good only for the rougher and more rugged natures and constitutions, but injurious for the shrinking, the sensitive, the gentle, and refined, and for the sensibilities of exquisite genius hidden in its childhood, cannot, on the whole, be the best. Cowper, however, was not disqualified, either by excessive delicacy of temperament or delicacy of constitution, for the rough-and-tumble even of a town school; it was the moral influences that he commented upon with such just and graphic severity in "The Tirocinium," which is a poem recommending *private tuition* in preference to an education in any public school whatever. Cowper delighted in the athletic sports of boyhood, and was foremost in them for skill and energy, so that thus far, at least, it was nothing in his own idiosyncracies that created the prejudice, or unfitted him to bear an impartial testimony. But what he saw in others, and knew from experience, of the injurious, desolating moral effect, the mining and sapping of religious principle, if such principle had been taught in early childhood, the precocious instruction in fashionable vices, the exclusion or dishonour of religious truth and a religious example, the forming and fixing of habits and a character that, whatever might be the sphere moulded of hereditary fortune here, could prepare the being for nothing but misery hereafter;—these are the things presented with such caustic satire, and at the same time affectionate and solemn warning, in this admirable poem. The reader of it, knowing that Cowper drew his description from reality, and that he did not exaggerate nor set down anything in malice, cannot wonder at the feelings of the poet, nor at his calling the public schools *menageries*.

"What cause can move us (knowing as we must
That these *menageries* all fail their trust)
To send our sons to scout and scamper there,
While colts and puppies cost us so much care?"

How beautiful, how impressive, is the opening of that poem, and the argument, from which the writer deduces the rule and foundation of its criticisms!

"That we are bound to cast the minds of youth
Betimes into the mould of heavenly truth,
That, taught of God, they may indeed be wise,
Nor, ignorantly wand'ring, miss the skies."

From the Creation, the chain of reasoning proceeds to man, placed by its Author as its intelligent, majestic head, the state, the splendour, and the throne being an intellectual kingdom. And thus intelligent, and standing as the crown of such a world, the wildest scorner of the laws of his Maker may, in a sober moment, find time to pause and to ask himself, why so framed and placed in such a position, so fearfully and wonderfully made? If only to see and feel by the light of reason, and with an aching heart, the contradiction, chaos, and fury of passions which reason can indeed condemn, but can bring no force to conquer them; if, impotent and self-wretched, in this world there is here no cure; and if, when this demonstration of folly, guilt, and helplessness is at an end, there is nothing better beyond, or nothing at all; then, of all the objects and creatures of this world, man stands self-impeached—though at the head of creation, the creature of least worth.

"And, useless while he lives, and when he dies,
Brings into doubt the wisdom of the skies;
What none could reverence, all might justly blame,
And man would breathe but for his Maker's shame."

But it is perfectly plain that if all the objects of the

verse shew forth the glory of the Maker, fulfilling some wise and obvious purpose, and demonstrating a divine intelligence and goodness, certainly not divine unless both good and intelligent, then he to whom is given or appointed the dominion over such a world, has been invested with faculties and powers to fill that station for the same great purpose, and stands arrayed in his kingship of intelligence and power, that he may reflect, not less than earth, sea, and air, the attributes of his Creator.

"That first or last, hereafter, if not here,
He too might make his Author's wisdom clear;
Praise Him on earth, or, obstinately dumb,
Suffer His justice in a world to come."

Such is the truly sublime argument with which Cowper introduces his rugged and profoundly satirical "Review of Schools." The close of it reminds the reader of a passage in Coleridge's "Statesman's Manual," by which he means the Bible, with its lessons of God's wisdom for man's guidance. "The root is never detached from the ground. It is GOD EVERYWHERE : *and all creatures conform to His decrees—the righteous by performance of the law, the disobedient by the sufferance of the penalty.*" If such the destiny of man, then, exclaim both poets, what combined madness and dishonesty to set up any system of public education of which the end is not man's highest interest, and the means God's truth!

Now the truths (Cowper continues) found out only with great pains by men of great learning, are not always as important as they are dear-bought.

"But truths on which depends our main concern,
That 'tis our shame and misery not to learn,
Shine by the side of every path we tread
With such a lustre, he that runs may read."

Here are verses from which Wordsworth might have drawn his lines :—

“The primal duties shine aloft like stars ;
The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless,
Are scatter’d at the feet of man like flowers.”

But the distinction between the two passages is that between the two poets—the one comparatively artificial and elaborately philosophic, even though full of nature and feeling ; the other the poet of rural simplicity, of piety, of Scripture truth, strong, homely, natural thought, deep feeling, and common-sense. Both are great poets ; but no passage can be turned into prose from Wordsworth’s pages that shall exhibit such a compact argument of plain, intelligible, strong thought, with a mighty and solemn conclusion, befitting and crowning its grandeur, as is to be found in the three opening paragraphs of Cowper’s “Tirocinium, or a Review of Schools.”

Southey speaks of the destructive influence of a public education upon those devotional habits which in a sweet Christian household may have been learned at home ; and he says that nothing which is not intentionally profane *can be more irreligious than the forms of religion* which are observed at such a school as that at Westminster ; and that the attendance of schoolboys in a pack at public worship is worse than perfunctory. Yet the master at Westminster, in Cowper’s time, as named in the Valediction, was Dr Nichols, apparently a conscientious man ; and Cowper afterward remarked upon the pains he took to prepare the boys for confirmation, acquitting himself like one who had a deep sense of the importance of his work. Then, for the first time, Cowper says he attempted

to pray in secret ; but being little accustomed to that exercise of the heart, and having very childish notions of religion, he found it a difficult and painful task, and was even then frightened at his own insensibility. "This difficulty," says he, "though it did not subdue my good purposes till the ceremony of confirmation was passed, soon after entirely conquered them. I relapsed into a total forgetfulness of God, with all the disadvantages of being the more hardened for being softened to no purpose." Oh, if there could have been at this time some kind, affectionate Christian teacher and friend, to lead the awakened, trembling, thoughtful boy to the Saviour, what years of agony and darkness might not have been prevented !

At Westminster, Cowper was in high favour with his master, from whom he received rewards for his poetical Latin exercises, and among the boys he excelled at football and cricket. Neither in mind nor body, therefore, was he idle ; and from one of his later letters in the review of this early period, we learn that while at Westminster he was cured of that alarming disorder in the eyes, for which he had been two years in the house of a renowned oculist, but to no good purpose. From thence, he says, he went to Westminster School, where, at the age of fourteen, the small-pox seized him, and proved the better oculist of the two, for it delivered him from all the inflammations to which he had been subject. He has also informed us that at the age of fourteen he first tried his hand at English verse, in a translation of one of the elegies of Tibullus. From that time, Hayley says, he had reason to believe that Cowper frequently applied himself

to poetical efforts; but the earliest preserved on record is the piece on finding the heel of a shoe, which he wrote at Bath in 1748, about a year before he left Westminster. It was in blank verse, and may be regarded as shadowing forth, through an interval of near forty years, some of the admirable native characteristics of the future poet of "The Task."

At the age of eighteen, Cowper himself says that he left Westminster, a good grammarian, but as ignorant of religion as the satchel at his back. He then spent nine months at home, and after some anxious deliberation, which such a step must have cost him, the profession of the law was fixed upon as the path of his future life, and he was articled with Mr Chapman, an attorney, for three years. It was a choice most unsuited to his mental constitution, and his tastes and habits; and had it *not* been so, the poetical development of his genius must have been prevented by the absorption of his whole being in legal studies and pursuits. A genuine poet would have been sacrificed for the very common growth of an indifferent lawyer; for by no possibility could Cowper ever have risen to eminence in that profession: at the uttermost he would but amiably have adorned the gift of some friendly professional sinecure.

In the attorney's office, Cowper had for a fellow-clerk the celebrated Thurlow, afterward Lord-Chancellor. At a later period, Cowper wrote to Lady Hesketh, in reference to the tenour of his life in that three years' probation of it, that he and Thurlow were employed "from morning till night in giggling and making giggle," instead of studying law. In his own memoir of himself he says that he might

have lived and died *without seeing or hearing anything that might remind him of one single Christian duty*, had it not been that he was at liberty to spend his leisure time (which, he says, was wellnigh all my time) at his aunt's in Southampton Row. "By this means I had opportunity of seeing the inside of a church, whither I went with the family on Sundays, and which, probably, I should otherwise never have seen."

Cowper was twenty-one years of age when he left the attorney's office, and took rooms in the Middle Temple to continue his studies, in a manner, as he says, complete master of himself. And here commences the profoundly interesting and instructive account by himself of the development of his own character, and the change of his own being from carelessness to despondency, and from despondency to despair, madness, and attempted suicide; from suicide, frustrated by the providential mercy of God, he advanced to the deepest conviction of guilt, with an apprehension of the divine vengeance, carried for months almost to the extreme of despair; from that time he was brought, by the wonderful grace of God, to a simple, humble faith in the Lord Jesus, a clear, joyful, experimental understanding and appreciation of the conditions of salvation through his blood, and a profound peace and happiness in believing.

At his residence in the Temple began the first experience of that terrible despondency of soul, which at length grew into an enshrouding mental and physical disease, broken only by the grave. Day and night he describes himself under this dejection of spirits, as being upon the rack, lying down in horror, and rising up in despair. He

lost all relish even for his classical studies ; and, singularly enough, the only book in which he took any delight was a volume of Herbert's poems, which he then first met with, and pored over him all day long. After nearly a year spent in this wretched disquietude, without any relief, he at length betook himself to prayer, that is, he composed what he calls a set of prayers, and made frequent use of them. About the same time, spending several months with friends at Southampton, the cloud of insupportable gloom was very suddenly and unexpectedly removed from his soul while gazing at the lovely scenery. The deliverance thus experienced, which at first he ascribed to God's merciful answer to his prayers, he soon concluded to have been owing to nothing but a change of season and the amusing varieties of the place ; and he consequently argued that nothing but a continued circle of diversions and indulgence of appetite could secure him from a relapse. Acting on this principle, as soon as he returned to London he burned his prayers, and he says, that inasmuch as they had been a mere prepared form, away with them went all his thoughts of devotion, and of dependence upon God his Saviour.

Twelve years were spent in this manner, with companions and associates who, like himself, were (in his own description) professed Christians, or else professed infidels, in what Cowper calls *an uninterrupted course of sinful indulgence*. It is not necessary to exaggerate the meaning of this expression to all the intensity it would bear ; on the contrary, this would be false and unjust. To the awakened conscience, and the smitten heart, beneath the sense of God's holiness, the uninterrupted pursuit of worldly en-

joyment, though in the most moral style, without grossness, and in the best possible taste and dignity, would appear in reality an uninterrupted course of sinful indulgence. There may be the supreme worship of self, and a heart wholly unchanged by grace, even in connexion with the most irreproachable morality. We suppose that Cowper's life was, briefly, that of a gay, careless man, a man of the world; and he declares that he obtained at length so complete a victory over his conscience, that all remonstrances from that quarter were vain, and in a manner silenced. Yet, in the company of deists, when he heard the gospel blasphemed, he never failed to assert the truth of it with much vehemence, and was sometimes employed, when half intoxicated, in vindicating the truth of Scripture. A deistical friend, on one such occasion, answered his arguments by declaring that if what he said was true, then he was certainly damned by his own shewing and choosing.

In 1754, at the age of twenty-three, with such habits begun, he was admitted to the bar, and in 1756 suffered the loss of his father; an affliction of which he does not once speak in his memoirs of himself, nor, singularly enough, do we ever find him adverting to it in any of his letters, save only on one occasion, in a letter to his friend, Mr Rose, in 1787. "A sensible mind cannot do violence even to a local attachment, without much pain. When my father died, I was young, too young to have reflected much. He was rector of Berkhamstead, and there I was born. It had never occurred to me that a parson has no fee-simple in the house and glebe he occupies. There was neither tree, nor gate, nor stile, in all

that country, to which I did not feel a relation, and the house itself I preferred to a palace. I was sent for from London to attend him in his last illness, and he died just before I arrived. Then, and not till then, I felt for the first time that I and my native place were disunited for ever. I sighed a long adieu to fields and woods, from which I once thought I should never be parted, and was at no time so sensible of their beauties as just when I left them all behind me, to return no more."

Three years afterward he removed to the Inner Temple, and at the age of twenty-eight was made Commissioner of Bankrupts. He was at this time strongly attached to one of his cousins,—a most intelligent, interesting, and lovely person,—Miss Theodora Cowper, whom he would have married, for her own affections were as deeply concerned as his ; but the father absolutely refused his consent on account of their relationship. It was a deep, painful, disastrous disappointment, and unquestionably increased for a season his constitutional tendency to gloom and depression. He expressed his feelings in some affecting verses, which were sent to Lady Hesketh, the sister of the young lady whom he loved.

During his twelve years' residence in the Temple, he was member of a club consisting of several literary gentlemen, among whom were Thornton, Colman, Lloyd, and Joseph Hill, Esq., Cowper's constant correspondent for thirty years. Wilkes and Churchill, whose vigorous poetry Cowper admired, were of the same circle of associates. The character and life of some of these men of genius have been fitly characterised in three words—thoughtlessness, extravagance, and dissipation. Lloyd

died, the victim of his own excesses, at the early age of thirty-one years. Colman, after an immoral life, died in a lunatic asylum. Such might have been Cowper's fate, had not the mercy of Divine providence and grace rescued him from a participation in such ruin. He had mixed with such companions on equal terms, Southey has remarked, till a time of life in which habits take so strong a hold that they are not easily cast off. The period of his early intimacy with Lloyd is marked by a poetical epistle from Cowper to his friend in 1754, in which there occurs a reference to his own habitual depression of spirits, in lines that are to be marked as connected with the speedy development of his disorder. He remarks that he did not design, in writing verse, to rob his friend of his birthright to the inheritance, undivided, of Prior's easy jingle, nor to shew his own genius or wit,—possessing neither. Yet both were proved, and some of the strongest characteristics of the future poet are visible.

“’Tis not with either of these views
That I presume to address the Muse,
But to divert a fierce banditti,
(Sworn foes to everything that’s witty)
That with a black, infernal train,
Make cruel inroads in my brain,
And daily threaten to drive thence
My little garrison of sense.
The fierce banditti that I mean
Are gloomy thoughts, led on by spleen.”

The deepening of this depression into almost horror and despair is marked in his own memoirs of himself, as well as the means he took to dissipate the gloom. He seems to have been for years successful in removing it, or at

least keeping it at arm's length; and had it gone no further, it might have proved his irremediable ruin, by continuing him in the society of his dissipated companions too long and late for any recovery. But it pleased God that it should be permitted to deepen into absolute frenzy; and despair and suicide were made the providential angels that snatched Cowper from destruction.

CHAPTER III.

State of religion in England at the time of Cowper's conversion—Lady Huntingdon—Mr Madan—Lord Bolingbroke—Dr Stonehouse—Dr Cotton—Romaine—Venn—Some remarkable instances of grace.

THE year 1762, when Cowper was first under the cloud and passed through the sea, introductory to his being baptized, not into Moses but into Christ, may be taken as the centre of a most remarkable religious, if not literary period. We prefer it for a starting-point and vision of survey to the year of the half-century, mainly because it was nearer to the central development of the great religious awakening and revival in England, in which the revered and beloved Lady Huntingdon occupies a position so vital and important, so honoured and admired. And Cowper's conversion was one of the fruits of that revival, one of the precious ingatherings to the fold of the Redeemer, under that same general dispensation of the Spirit under which Newton and Scott, Whitefield and Wesley, were made instruments of such amazing power and brightness in advancing the kingdom of God.

Cowper's afflictions first brought him within reach of one of the eddies, as it were, of this mighty movement, in presenting him as the subject of deep spiritual distress to the Rev. Martin Madan for sympathy and guidance. Mr

Madan was a relative of Cowper, being the eldest son of Colonel Madan, who married the daughter of Judge Cowper, the brother of the Lord-Chancellor. Mr Madan was one of Lady Huntingdon's preachers, so called, that is, occupying one of the chapels founded by that woman of such enlarged intelligence and devoted and fearless piety. Cowper had known him at an earlier period, but regarded him in the light in which all that circle of evangelical disciples of Christ were esteemed by the circle of aristocracy, wealth, and fashion, to which the poet by birth belonged,—that is, as a misguided enthusiast. Mr Madan had been educated in the study of the law; but being convinced of his condition as a lost sinner, and brought to a knowledge of the grace of the gospel, became a preacher of Christ crucified, and was the founder and first chaplain of the Lock Hospital, a situation which Thomas Scott, the commentator, and author of "*The Force of Truth*," afterward filled for a season.

Mr Madan's conversion took place about ten years before Cowper's, and Cowper regarded him, during those years, as one of the enthusiasts, in consequence. The preaching of Wesley and the Methodists was then attracting crowds in London, and one evening Mr Madan, in the midst of a gay and careless circle at a coffee-house, was dispatched by his companions to go and hear Wesley, who was preaching that evening in the neighbourhood, and then to come back and "take him off" for their amusement. He entered heartily into the joke; but it happened that just as he took his seat in the chapel with that purpose, Wesley was repeating his text, *Prepare to meet thy God*, with an intensity of solemnity and awe that

arrested Madan's conscience at the outset. The impression deepened as Wesley went on with his rousing and fervent appeals on the destiny of the soul and the necessity of repentance ; and when Madan returned to the coffee-house, and was asked by his laughing companions if he had taken off the old Methodist, all the answer he could make was, "No, gentlemen, but he has taken *me* off." He then left the gay circle, and never returned to it, but was soon ordained a minister of the Church of England, and preached his first sermon to a great crowd of curious, wondering listeners of all classes in All-hallows Church, Lombard Street. He was a heartfelt Christian, and an able preacher ; and thus was prepared the first evangelist who was to meet Cowper when half-distracted, and trembling under the overhanging crags and flashes of Sinai. So he met him, and preached Christ to his wounded spirit, then upon the verge of madness ; and immediately after that consolation, which seemed a visible preparation from heaven for the storm he was to encounter, Cowper passed into the gloom of utter insanity and despair. It was almost like putting a chronometer into the cabin of a vessel, when there were none on board of sufficient intelligence to consult it ; but who can tell how far the first gleam of light, the first word of mercy, the first revelation of the gospel, may have wrought in Cowper's heart, even during the dethronement of reason, and among his wandering thoughts prepared him afterward to lay hold on the hope set before him ?

In a letter written to his cousin, Mrs Cowper, the sister of Martin Madan, soon after Cowper had taken up

his residence in the family of the Unwins, he described his feelings in regard to Mr Madan, contrasting them with what they had been formerly. "Your brother Martin has been very kind to me, having written to me twice in a style which, though it was once irksome to me, to say the least, I now know how to value. I pray God to forgive me the many light things I have both said and thought of him and his labours. Hereafter I shall consider him as a burning and shining light, and as one of those who, having turned many to righteousness, shall shine hereafter as the stars for ever and ever."

It was Mr Madan by whom the instructive anecdote was preserved and related in regard to the interview between Lord Bolingbroke and Dr Church, a prominent divine of the Church of England, who, with Bishop Lavington and others, rejected and ridiculed *the doctrines of grace*. The anecdote was given to Mr Madan by Lady Huntingdon herself, who received it from Lord Bolingbroke. As it combines with other occurrences to form a vivid picture of the times, such as we would like to convey, it may not be a digression to repeat it. Lord Bolingbroke was employed one morning in his study reading Calvin's "Institutes," when Dr Church, a divine of the English Establishment, called on him. The deist asked the divine if he could guess what book it was that he had been studying. "Really, my lord, I cannot," answered the doctor. "Well," said Lord Bolingbroke, "it is Calvin's 'Institutes.' What do you think of such matters?" "Oh, my lord, we don't think about such antiquated stuff; we teach the plain doctrines of virtue and morality, and have long laid aside those abstruse

points about grace." "Look you, doctor," said Lord Bolingbroke, "you know I don't believe the Bible to be a divine revelation ; *but they who do can never defend it on any principles but the doctrine of grace.* To say the truth, I have at times been almost persuaded to believe it upon this view of things ; and there is one argument which has gone very far with me in behalf of its authenticity, which is, that the belief in it exists upon earth even when committed to the care of such as you, who pretend to believe it, and yet deny the only principles on which it is defensible."

Dr Stonehouse was one of the crowd of deists who, along with Lord Bolingbroke, attacked Christianity at this period, but was also one of the remarkable fruits of the mighty work of grace by which so many of the higher classes, as well as the lower, were snatched as brands from the burning. Dr Doddridge was the happy and honoured instrument in his conversion, and, like Mr Madan, Dr Stonehouse also renounced his profession and became a preacher of the gospel. Dr Cotton, the eminent physician and poet, who kept the lunatic asylum at St Alban's, where Cowper's bark, "though tempest-tossed and half a wreck," was to find shelter, was a friend of Dr Stonehouse, and by him was introduced to the notice of Lady Huntingdon, about ten years before Cowper came under his care. On the publication of Cotton's volume of poems, "The Visions, in Verse," the author sent a copy to her ladyship, who, with her accustomed sweetness, delicacy, and faithfulness, on acknowledging the receipt of the volume, pointed out to the amiable author what she felt to be its deficiencies (considering its subjects), in conse-

quence of the absence of religious truth. Dr Cotton received her remarks most kindly, and Lady Huntingdon thus speaks in one of her letters in regard to the incident: "I am glad that my good friend was not offended at my late well-meant admonition and reproof. We must be faithful to each other, or else how can we expect to meet with joy at the great tribunal? I trust he will yet be enabled to see by faith the Lord's Christ. Blessed be God, in him all fulness dwells, of merit and righteousness, of grace and salvation, and this for the vilest of the vile, for whoever will. Oh, then, my friend,

" 'If haply still thy mental shade
Dark as the midnight gloom be made,
On the sure faithful arm Divine
Firm let thy fastening trust recline.
The gentlest Sire, the best of Friends,
To thee nor loss nor harm intends.
Though toss'd on a tempestuous main,
No wreck thy vessel shall sustain.
Should there remain of rescuing grace
No glimpse, no footsteps left to trace,
Hear the Lord's voice; 'tis Jesus' will;
Believe, thou poor dark pilgrim, still.'

"Thus much I have written to my worthy friend at St Alban's, and I trust God will bless my poor, unworthy services to his eternal good. I long to see his fine genius consecrated to the best of causes, the glory of our incarnate God, and the salvation of souls redeemed by his most precious blood."

If these lines ever fell under the notice of Cowper, during the darkness of *his* mental shade, nothing could be more admirably adapted to his case than the instruction so conveyed.

Lady Huntingdon at one time sent to Dr Cotton the

religious work of Marshall, entitled "The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification!" Dr Cotton entered into some little controversy with his friend Hervey, the author of the "Meditations," in regard to Marshall's sentiments, which he thought unscriptural and unreasonable. Mr Hervey endeavoured to enlighten Cotton's mind as to the truths of the gospel as set forth in the work by Marshall, but with what success we know not. Cowper understood and admired the volume, if Cotton did not; and very likely it was in the lunatic asylum, and under Dr Cotton's care, that he met with it; so that Lady Huntingdon's gift reached the right recipient, a heart prepared for it, and one that needed it. Cowper says, in one of his letters, "Marshall is an old acquaintance of mine. I have both read him and heard him read with pleasure and edification; the doctrines he maintains are, under the influence of the Spirit of Christ, the very life of my soul and the soul of all my happiness. I think Marshall one of the best writers, and the most spiritual expositor of the Scriptures I ever read."

The characteristics of this era of the Holy Spirit's power in England cannot be better conveyed than by the relation of some of the extraordinary cases of conversion through the preaching of Whitefield, Romaine, Wesley, and others. One of the most singular was that of Mr Thorpe, who afterward became an effective minister of that gospel which at first he ridiculed. He was one of Whitefield's most insulting opposers; and possessing an unusual talent for mimicry, he not only interrupted his sermons in public, but ridiculed them in private in convivial theatrical circles. On one occasion, at such a

gathering for pleasure, revelry, and wit, he and three of his companions laid a wager for the most effective imitation and ridicule of Whitefield's preaching. Each was to open the Bible at random and preach an extempore harangue from the first verse that presented itself, and the audience were to adjudge the prize after hearing all. Thorpe's three competitors each went through the game with impious buffoonery, and then it came his turn. They had the table for their rostrum, and as he stepped upon it, confident of his superior ability, Thorpe exclaimed, "I shall beat you all." They handed him the Bible, and when he opened it, the invisible providence of God directed his eye at the first glance to the verse in the thirteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, "Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish." He read the words, but the moment he had uttered them he began to see and to feel their full import. The sword of the Spirit in that passage went through his soul as a flash of lightning, revealing and consuming. An instantaneous conviction of his own guilt as a sinner against God seized hold upon him, and conscience was aroused, as it sometimes is, suddenly and unexpectedly, and always will be when God sets our sins before us in the light of his countenance. The retribution in that passage he felt was for himself, and its terrors glared upon him in array against his own soul, and out of that rapid and overwhelming conviction he preached.

The truths of guilt, death, eternity, and the judgment to come, were never proclaimed in gloomier aspect, for there was no mixture of grace with them. Yet he frequently afterward declared that if ever in his life he preached by the assistance of the Spirit of God, it was at

that time. The whole subject was revealed before him—the necessity of repentance, the threatened perdition of the soul, the terrors of the second death; and he preached to his companions, guilty, reprobate, and dying, as himself reprobate and dying. His fervour and fire increased as he went on, and the sympathetic gloom of his audience deepened the convictions on his own soul, and the sentences fell from his lips with such intense and burning imagery, and such point, pungency, and power of language, that, as he afterward related, it seemed to him as if his own hair would stand erect with terror at their awfulness. It was as a blast from the lake burning with fire and brimstone. Yet no man interrupted him, for all felt and saw, from the solemnity of his manner, what an overwhelming impression there was upon him, and though their astonishment deepened into angry and awful gloom beneath the lurid glare of his address, yet they sat spell-bound, listening and gazing at him, and when he descended from the table a profound silence reigned in the whole circle, and not one word concerning the wager was uttered. Thorpe instantly withdrew from the company without uttering a word, and, it is needless to say, never returned to that society; but, after a season of the deepest distress and conflict, passed into the full light of the gospel, and at length became a most successful preacher of its grace.

Two other cases may be named, occurring under the ministry of two of Lady Huntingdon's chaplains, at Oat Hall; the first under the preaching of the celebrated Mr Romainé, and the last under that of Mr Venn, scarcely less remarkable as a devout experimental preacher. The

two cases are from extremes in society, and therefore are with greater propriety presented as illustrations of the all-pervading power of this work of God's grace. And the time of these two striking instances was very near that of Cowper's own spiritual arrest and conversion, from 1762 to 1764. The first was of a military gentleman of an ancient family, Captain Scott, who had been a soldier from his seventeenth year, and was one of the officers exposed to imminent peril at the battle of Minden, in 1759. A sense of his danger led him to the daily reading of the psalms and hymns in the Church lessons of each day, but beyond this he advanced not a step to the knowledge of the grace of Christ as the way of salvation. At length, being quartered in the neighbourhood of Oat Hall, a pious farmer invited him to go and hear a very famous man in the Hall preaching for Lady Huntingdon. It was Mr Romaine, and thither he went to hear him the following Sunday; and Mr Romaine's text was as if aimed and meant for the very condition of Scott's awakened but ignorant soul. It was the words of our blessed Lord, in John xiv. 6, "I AM THE WAY." It was accompanied by the Spirit of God, and from that time Captain Scott was a changed man, and speedily began to preach to his own soldiers the truth which he had learned to love. He exhorted his dragoons daily, and would not be deterred by any of the annoyances and opposition which he had to meet in the army. Fletcher described him to Lady Huntingdon as preaching publicly in his regimentals to numerous congregations at Leicester in the Methodist meeting-house. "This red-coat," said he, "will shame many a black one. I am sure he shames me." At length

he sold his military commission, and entered into the ministry. For twenty years he was one of the preachers at the Tabernacle in London. He renounced a brilliant career of honour and advancement in this world for the privilege, which had become dearer to him than all things else, of preaching Christ crucified to dying sinners.

The second of these instances was in humbler life, but more remarkable still for the great age of the man converted. It was an old man named Abraham, who for fifty years was a common soldier, and getting discharged from the service, settled with his wife near Oat Hall. When Lady Huntingdon's chapel was opened at Oat Hall, Abraham was just *a hundred years old*; but though of that great age, still vigorous, active, and, on the subject of religion, inquisitive, and at the opening of the new chapel he made up his mind to hear the Methodists. That morning Mr Venn preached, and that was the hour of Abraham's baptism by the Spirit. Never had he heard such truth, never with such perception of it, never so presented. "This," said he, "is the very truth of God's Word, which I have been seeking, and never heard it so plain before. Here will I abide." From that time forward old Abraham was the child of God, growing in grace, and in the knowledge of the Saviour. He lived six years a most consistent and happy life as a Christian disciple; and his great age and heavenly conversation made him the object of veneration, wonder, and love. He always called the day when he heard the gospel from Mr Venn's lips the day of his birth, and spoke of himself, in allusion to Isaiah lxx. 20, as the child born a hundred years old. We know of only one similar instance on record, the case

of the aged convert under the preaching of Flavel, who lived to adorn the profession of his faith to the age of one hundred and fifteen years.

Extraordinary cases of conversion at this same period when Cowper's saving experience of the truth began, might be multiplied ; his own case was but one of a series, though in some respects the most remarkable. It was a time of spiritual life and power, and every class of society in England felt it, notwithstanding the multitude in every circle who chose to take to themselves that dread malediction upon the enemies of such a work of grace, Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish ! It is surprising that Southey could have allowed himself to assume and perpetuate such prejudice and scorn ; that he could ascribe (even by insinuation) the piety of Lady Huntingdon to hereditary insanity, and deplore the failure of all the efforts of established dignitaries in the Church to bring her to a saner sense of devotion ! that he could regard the piety of Bunyan as the fever of a burning enthusiasm, and speak of Cowper's season of personal and social religious enjoyment as having been *preposterously* called the happiest period of his life ! One is almost tempted to exclaim, beholding such a man employed with such a spirit upon the wonders of providence and grace developed in the lives of such men as Bunyan, Whitefield, Wesley, and Cowper, "What hast thou to do to declare God's statutes, or that thou shouldst take His covenant in thy mouth, seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest His words behind thee ? Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother ; thou slanderest thine own mother's son."

In contrast with the spirit of detraction, and the license of literary scorn, how beautiful and noble was the character of Whitefield, as drawn by Cowper in one of the earliest published of his poems, the "Essay on Hope." It was twenty years after his own conversion, and twelve years after Whitefield's death, when the poet penned this graphic and interesting portraiture. Had Cowper drawn the character of Wesley, it would have stood to all ages in the same Christian light, the truthful, unexaggerated testimonial of an admiring, grateful heart.

"Leuconomus—(beneath well-sounding Greek
 I slur a name a poet must not speak)—
 Stood pilloried on infamy's high stage,
 And bore the pelting storm of half an age;
 The very butt of slander, and the blot
 For every dart that malice ever shot.
 The man that mention'd *him* at once dismiss'd
 All mercy from his lips, and sneer'd and hiss'd.
 His crimes were such as Sodom never knew,
 And perjury stood up to swear all true;
 His aim was mischief and his zeal pretence;
 His speech rebellious against common sense;
 A knave, when tried on honesty's plain rule,
 And when by that of reason, a mere fool;
 The world's best comfort was, his doom was past,
 Die when he might, he must be damn'd at last.
 "Now, Truth, perform thine office; waft aside
 The curtain drawn by prejudice and pride.
 Reveal (the man is dead) to wondering eyes
 This more than monster, in his proper guise.
 He loved the world that hated him; the tear
 That dropp'd upon his Bible was sincere.
 Assail'd by scandal, and the tongue of strife,
 His only answer was a blameless life;
 And he that forged, and he that threw the dart,
 Had each a brother's interest in his heart.
 Paul's love of Christ, and steadiness unbribed,
 Were copied close in him, and well transcribed.
 He follow'd Paul, his zeal a kindred flame,
 His apostolic charity the same.

Like him cross'd cheerfully tempestuous seas,
Forsaking country, kindred, friends, and ease.
Like him he labour'd, and like him content
To bear it, suffer'd shame where'er he went.
Blush, Calumny, and write upon his tomb,
If honest eulogy can spare the room,
The deep repentance of thy thousand lies,
Which, aim'd at him, have pierced the offended skies,
And say, Blot out my sin, confess'd, deplored,
Against Thine image in Thy saint, O Lord!"

Perhaps the Word of God was never preached in England with greater unction and power, certainly never with more wonderful results, than by that circle of preachers, among whom Whitefield, Wesley, Romaine, Venn, Berridge, Toplady, Newton, Scott, and Cecil, held so conspicuous a position. The piety of Lady Huntingdon was a spring of impulse and of influence in this remarkable circle. Never was there a brighter manifestation of divine grace in the female character than in hers. Her family was one of the foremost in the crowd of the British aristocracy, at a period when that aristocracy was in its fullest bloom of power, wealth, and grandeur. Cowper's withdrawal from that splendid social circle, of which at one time it was hoped he might have been an ornament, was a bitter mortification to his relatives and friends. They assigned his gloom and madness to religious enthusiasm as its cause, when religion was its only cure. It is not so singular that at that day they should have laboured under so dark a delusion—a lunacy ten thousand-fold worse than *his* at any period of its disastrous power; but that a biographer and historian, himself professedly a member of the Christian Church, should have insinuated hereditary insanity as the cause of Lady Huntingdon's

conversion, and Cowper's conversion as the cause of his insanity, and Newton's faithful and tender instruction, sympathy, and care in the duties of religion, as the occasion of general lunacy among his flock, and that, too, after more than fifty years' calm judgment of the age, in admiration of the providence and grace of God in the lives and religious experience of those personages, is surprising indeed. Cowper's pointed and severe description of the spirit that characterised the multitude in *his* age is applicable to not a few in *ours*:—

“ Build by whatever plan caprice decrees,
 With what materials, on what ground you please ;
 Your hope shall stand unblamed, perhaps admired,
 If not that hope the Scripture has required.
 The strange conceits, vain projects, and wild dreams
 With which hypocrisy for ever teems,
 (Though other follies strike the public eye
 And raise a laugh,) pass unmolested by.
 But if, unblamable in word and thought,
 A *man* arise, a man whom God has taught,
 With all Elijah's dignity of tone,
 And all the love of the beloved John,
 To storm the citadels they build in air,
 And smite th' untemper'd wall 'tis death to spare,
 To sweep away all refuges of lies,
 And place, instead of quirks themselves devise,
Lama Sabachthani before their eyes ;
 To prove that without Christ all gain is loss,
 All hope despair, that stands not on his cross ;
 Except the few his God may have impress'd,
 A tenfold frenzy seizes all the rest.

“ Throughout mankind, the Christian kind at least,
 There dwells a consciousness in every breast
 That folly ends where genuine hope begins,
 And he that finds his heaven must lose his sins.
 Nature opposes, with her utmost force,
 This riving stroke, this ultimate divorce ;
 And, while religion seems to be her view,
 Hates with a deep sincerity *the true*.

For this, of all that ever influenced man
Since Abel worshipp'd, or the world began,
This only spares no lust, admits no plea,
But makes him, if at all, completely free ;
Sounds forth the signal, as she mounts her car,
Of an eternal, universal war ;
Rejects all treaty, penetrates all wiles,
Scorns with the same indifference frowns and smiles ;
Drives through the realms of sin, where riot reels,
And grinds his crown beneath her burning wheels !
Hence all that is in man, pride, passion, art,
Powers of the mind, and feelings of the heart,
Insensible of truth's almighty charms,
Starts at her first approach, and sounds to arms !
While bigotry, with well-dissembled fears,
His eyes shut fast, his fingers in his ears,
Mighty to parry and push by God's Word,
With senseless noise, his argument the sword,
Pretends a zeal for godliness and grace,
And spits abhorrence in the Christian's face."

CHAPTER IV.

Literature and genius of the period—Prevalence of scepticism.

THE same year, 1762, may be taken as a year of survey, in regard to the aspect and influences of times, circumstances, society, and literature, as well as religion. It was about twenty years after the death of Pope, forty-one from the death of Prior, forty-three from that of Addison, thirty-three from that of Steele, seventeen from that of Swift, thirty from that of Gay, thirty-six from that of Vanbrugh, and thirty-nine from that of Congreve. Arbuthnot died in 1735, Lord Bolingbroke in 1751. Some of these writers had stamped the manners and opinions of the age by their genius, and formed a taste and style then fully prevalent. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, so distinguished for the ease, wit, and beauty of her letters, died in 1762. Lord Shaftesbury had died in 1713, and the collection of his works had been published in 1716; and the powerful influence which the mingled fascination of his style and deistical opinions exerted in various directions may be learned in the autobiographies of two men as contradistinguished as Dr Franklin and John Newton, both having been brought, at an early period, under a temporary despotism beneath that nobleman's writings.

Atterbury died in 1731, Defoe in the same year. Bishop Berkely died in 1753; Bishop Lowth, 1787; Dr Samuel Clarke, 1729; Bishop Butler, 1752; Handel, 1759; Garrick, 1779. Hannah More was born in 1745, and commenced her literary career when Cowper was writing the *Olney Hymns*. Among the most celebrated divines of the period were Bishop Newton, Farmer, Lardner, Lowman, Lowth, Leland, Chandler, Warburton, Jortin, Hoadly, Wesley, Whitefield, John Newton, Soame Jenyns, Scott, Kennicott, and Cecil.

The period we are contemplating was fourteen years after the death of Thomson, and thirty years since the publication of the poem of "The Seasons." It was fourteen years after the death of Watts. It was just after the publication of Young's "Night Thoughts." Blair's "Grave" had been published in 1743, the "Night Thoughts" in 1760. Yet Southey has spoken of "The Grave" as a poem written in imitation of the "Night Thoughts;" a criticism which indicates the carelessness and haste with which some other portions of his "Life of Cowper" may have been composed. Dr Johnson had published his "Dictionary" in 1754, and his "Rasselas" soon after. It was three or four years after the publication of Gray's "Odes." It was just after the publication of Goldsmith's "Citizen of the World," and just before the appearance of his poem of "The Traveller." It was the year before the death of Shenstone. It was eight years after the death of Collins, the poet so nearly at one time resembling Cowper in the dread eclipse of reason under which he died, and in his inimitably exquisite poetry, coming nearer, in every line, to the perfection of Cowper

in his most harmonious pieces, than any other poet in the English language. Chatterton, the marvellous boy that perished in his pride, was at this time ten years old, and began his sad, strange, poetical career only one year afterward. Churchill was in the brief bonfire of reputation, and had just published his "Rosciad." The admiration of his poems was like the gaze of a crowd at a display of fire-works from the top of the London Monument. Falconer had just published his "Shipwreck," and it was the year of the publication of M'Pherson's "Fingal."

Edmund Burke had published his "Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful," but had not yet entered Parliament, nor began that development of his wonderful genius which afterward attracted the gaze of all Europe. Garrick and Foote were in the midst of their fame, and Sir Joshua Reynolds of his. The Johnsonian Club and circle were in the first zest of their social and literary enjoyment. It was the year after the death of Richardson, the novelist. Smollett, Fielding, Mackenzie, Horace Walpole, Mr Beckford, Mrs Inchbald, Mrs Radcliffe, Miss Burney, and some others, had opened, or were striking out, various new paths in that wilderness of fiction in which the main body of readers in our world have since been wandering, delighted and absorbed; paths that, some of them, if pursued, lead to inevitable ruin. It was three years after the publication of Robertson's "History of Scotland," and the year of the publication of the two last volumes of Hume's "History of England." Adam Smith's "Theory of Moral Sentiments" had been published in 1759. Sir William Blackstone was in the midst of his eminent reputation and service in the law; his "Commentaries" were published

in 1765. Reid's "Inquiry into the Human Understanding" was published in 1764; Lord Kames' "Elements of Criticism" in 1762. The first edition of Percy's "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry" was published 1765. The first volume of Warburton's "Divine Legation" was published in 1738, the last not till 1788, after the author's death. Matthew Tindal's "Christianity as Old as the Creation" was published not long before the "Divine Legation;" and that deistical controversy arose out of it in which Dr Waterland and Dr Conyers Middleton took an important part. Middleton's "Life of Cicero" was first published about 1740; and Leland's "Deistical Writers" near the same period. Neal's "History of the Puritans" was published, the two first volumes in 1733. The fourth edition of Warburton's work was dedicated, in 1765, to Lord Mansfield, then and for many years the Lord Chief-Justice of England.

Until the publication of the poem of the "Night Thoughts," there had been, for near three-quarters of a century, little intrusion of religion into what was called Polite Literature; but the world had seen the influence of a witty, licentious, and infidel literature passing into what was called religion. They had seen simplicity and nature retire before the tinsel and the blaze of art enshrined by genius, and worshipped with idolatrous devotion. Formalism had taken the place of true piety; fervour was ridiculed as fanaticism, faith despised as superstition, and superstition exalted into the place of faith. Deism and Socinianism had prevailed under the robes of the priesthood of the Church of England, and were encountered, if at all, with cold, elaborate, artificial learning,

in the shape of cumbrous Essays, of which the collection of Tracts by Watson, in five octavo volumes, is a favourable specimen. When Whitefield and Wesley began their impetuous and shining career, religion was at a low ebb indeed in the Church and among the people of England. Bishop Butler presented his "Analogy" to the Queen in 1736, and in the prefatory advertisement to that profound and powerful work he was constrained to write as follows : "It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world."

And at the close of that great work he said, "If men can go on to vilify or disregard Christianity, which is to talk and act as if they had a demonstration of its falsehood, there is no reason to think they would alter their behaviour to any purpose, though there were a demonstration of its truth." There *was* a practical demonstration, in the outpouring of the Divine Spirit attending the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley, such as had not been witnessed since the days of Pentecost; but the demonstration itself was maligned and blasphemed by many, as the casting out of devils by Beelzebub.

Cowper says himself, in one of his letters to a dear religious friend in 1767, "My religious principles are generally excepted against, and the conduct they produce,

wherever they are heartily maintained, is still more the object of disapprobation than the principles themselves." In a previous letter to Lady Hesketh, he had said, "Solitude has nothing gloomy in it, if the soul points upward. St Paul tells his Hebrew converts, 'Ye are come (already come) to Mount Sion, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly of the first-born, which are written in heaven, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.' When this is the case, as surely it was with them, or the Spirit of Truth had never spoken it, there is an end of the melancholy and dulness of life at once. . . . A lively faith is able to anticipate in some measure the joys of that heavenly society which the soul shall actually possess hereafter. . . . My dear cousin, *one half of the Christian world would call this madness, fanaticism, and folly.* . . . Let us see that we do not deceive ourselves in a matter of such infinite moment."

If one half the Christian world had got so turned away from life into the frost and death of formalism, with little or nothing of life left but just enough for the demonstration of bitterness and opposition against what were called the doctrines of grace, and in ridicule of the style of fervent piety called *Methodism*, how deplorable an influence must have reigned in the world of popular and fashionable literature! No wonder that a sarcastic and haughty deism, and the frigidity and carelessness of natural religion, maintained so great and wide a supremacy. The idea of *conversion* by the grace of God was scoffed at, was regarded as enthusiasm or fanaticism, assuming, indeed, a mild and melancholy type in an amiable man such as Cowper, but still a self-righteous, presumptuous, conceited form of

spiritual bigotry and pride. In such a period, great was the need of instruments to be raised up and prepared, like Cowper, Hannah More, and Wilberforce, to carry the powerful voice of truth into the drawing-rooms of the great, the gay, and the fashionable, and to set Christianity itself, in its simplest gospel dress, amid the attractions of science, genius, and literary taste.

CHAPTER V.

The arrest of Cowper—Providences and discipline of trial by which he was awakened—His attempt at suicide—His conviction of sin—His anguish and despair.

THE great event of Cowper's conversion made a change in his whole life and social circle, such as no temporary insanity, had he recovered from it in any other way than that of a religious faith by Divine grace, could have effected. It broke up all his habits, and removed him for ever from the gay and dissipated companions, in whose society so many years of the best part of his life had already been spent. "The storm of sixty-three," as Cowper designated the period of his terrific gloom and madness at St Alban's, made a wreck of the friendships of many years; and he said that he had great reason to be thankful that he had lost none of his acquaintances but those whom he had determined not to keep. He refers, in his letters, to some of them who had been suddenly arrested by death, while he himself was passing through the valley of the shadow of death in the lunatic asylum. "Two of my friends have been cut off during my illness, in the midst of such a life as it is frightful to reflect upon; and here am I in better health and spirits than I can almost remember to have enjoyed before, after having spent months in the apprehension of instant death.

How mysterious are the ways of Providence ! Why did I receive grace and mercy ? Why was I preserved, afflicted for my good, received, as I trust, into favour, and blessed with the greatest happiness I can ever know or hope for in this life, while they were overtaken by the great arrest, unawakened, unrepenting, and every way unprepared for it ? His infinite wisdom, to whose infinite mercy I owe it all, can solve these questions, and none beside Him." One of these friends cut off so unexpectedly, was poor Robert Lloyd the poet, son of Rev. Dr Lloyd, one of the teachers at Westminster School. They had been among Cowper's intimate associates in the Nonsense Club, with Bonnel Thornton, George Colman, and others of a like convivial character. No wonder at the feelings of gratitude and amazement with which he looked back at his own danger, and at the supernatural suddenness and violence of his escape.

In 1762, the revolutionary chain of events in Cowper's existence began, and his character and life were together arrested and turned back from an earthly into a heavenly career. He had glided on through life thus far, till he was thirty-one years of age, a fine classical scholar, a man of exquisite refined taste, an amiable, playful, affectionate temper, a deep humorous vein, and a disposition for social amusement, as well as a tendency to mental depression, that led him to seek the enjoyment of society for relief. He had neither religious habit nor principle, but had come to an acquiescence, with which he says he had settled down, in the following conclusion as to the future life, namely, "That the only course he could take to secure his present peace was to wink hard against the pros-

pect of future misery, and to resolve to banish all thoughts upon a subject on which he thought to so little purpose."

To wink hard against the prospect of future misery! How graphic a picture of the struggle in a careless, prayerless, pleasure-loving heart, against partial conviction and anxiety in regard to the retributions of a future state! This winking hard against the prospects of future misery is, we apprehend, the only religious effort of many a mind, and the only step of many a disturbed and frightened conscience toward peace. Some persons wink so hard, that the effect is like that produced by a blow upon the temples, or a strong, sudden pressure over the eyeballs, making the eyes flash fire. Strange radiances appear in these eye-flashes, which some are willing to accept as revelations, when they have rejected the Word of God, or so utterly neglected it, as to be quite ignorant of its actual details in reference to the future world.

If the soul were suddenly illuminated, in the midst of its carelessness and unbelief, to see and feel things as they are, terror would take possession of the conscience and the heart, and all insensibility would pass away for ever. But we are often as men in a trance, or as persons walking in their sleep, and conscious of nothing. Sleep-walkers are never terrified, even by dangers that would take from a waking man all his self-possession. Sleep-walkers have been known to balance themselves upon the topmost ridge of the most perilous heights, with as much indifference and security as if they were walking upon even ground. They have been seen treading at the eaves of lofty buildings, and bending over, and looking down into the street, making the gazers, who have discovered the experiment, tremble with

fright, and grow faint with expectation ; and if the trance should suddenly pass away, and the waking sense be restored, the self-discovery would prove fatal, and the man would lose his balance and fall, where before he trod with perfect indifference and security. Just so to the quickened sight and conscience of spiritual spectators, careless sinners are beheld walking asleep and indifferent on the verge of the world of woe. They bend over toward the flaming gulf, and if they saw and felt what it is they are doing, what dreadful hazard they are running, there would, for the time, be no more life in them. The consciousness of meeting a holy God, and the thought of what was before them, would fill their minds with anguish, which nothing but the blood of Christ, nothing but a heartfelt, humble application of the soul for God's mercy, through Christ, nothing but the faith and hope of forgiveness, could possibly allay.

Through this process of awakening and terror, Cowper was to pass to life and peace eternal, though reason itself was to be dethroned, for a short period, in the dreadful conflict. But God's time of interposing mercy had come. Cowper had now nearly spent what little patrimony had fallen to him, and began to be in want ; under *fear* of want, he began to desire an appointment. Here occurs a passage in his autobiography which the writers of his life long concealed studiously from notice, and continued to ignore its existence, even when it had been printed, and even garbled it in printing it themselves. Hayley ran over the passage by saying that Cowper, in this emergency, had prospects of emolument by the interest of his family, and was nominated to the offices of Reading-Clerk,

and Clerk of the Private Committees in the House of Lords. Now, let Cowper, as a grateful child of God, shewing us from what depths of guilt and misery he had been rescued, open the door of his own heart, or a window in it, and tell us what was going on, with his own mature and devout judgment upon the transactions ; a judgment severer, certainly, than a man of the world would ever pass upon mere motives, but nevertheless the self-judgment of a mind and heart, looking back from a state of calm and heavenly peace with God, over a life that had been passed without him.

Under some imagination or apprehension of approaching want, Cowper says, " I one day said to a friend of mine, if the Clerk of the Journals of the House of Lords should die, I had some hopes that my kinsman, who had the place in his disposal, would think of and appoint me to succeed him. We both agreed that the business of the place, being transacted in private, would exactly suit me ; *and both expressed an earnest wish for his death*, that I might be provided for. Thus did I covet what God had commanded me not to covet, and involved myself in still deeper guilt, by doing it in the spirit of a murderer."

It was remarkable that very speedily this Clerk of the Journals of the House died, and two other offices by the same event fell vacant, being in the gift of Major Cowper, the poet's friend and kinsman. These two offices of Reading-Clerk, and Clerk of the Committees, being the most profitable places, were at once offered to Cowper, and he immediately, without a moment's reflection, accepted them ; but at the same time, as it pleased God, " received a dagger in his heart," and began to be deeply perplexed

by the impossibility of executing a business of so public a nature. After a week spent in misery, he besought his friend to give him the simple Clerkship of the Journals, instead of the higher situation, and, when this exchange was accomplished, he began to be somewhat at ease.

But a new difficulty arose, for Major Cowper's right to nominate his kinsman being disputed, and a powerful party formed in favour of another candidate, every inch of ground had to be contested; there must be an examination at the bar of the House, and Cowper had to visit the Journal Office daily, in order to qualify himself for the strictest scrutiny. This brought back the whole horror of his fears and perplexities. He knew to a demonstration that upon these terms the Clerkship of the Journals was no place for him. Nevertheless, his friend's honour and interest, and his own reputation and circumstances, made it seem absolutely necessary that he should persevere, and did indeed urge him forward, though only as a fettered criminal is dragged to execution. "They whose spirits are formed like mine," says he, in his own journal of these occurrences, "to whom a public exhibition of themselves on any occasion is mortal poison, may have some idea of the horror of my situation; others can have none. My continual misery at length brought on a nervous fever; quiet forsook me by day, and peace by night. A finger raised against me was more than I could stand against."

In this distressing condition, he went daily to the Journal Office, and read, in preparation for his examination, like a man beneath the nightmare. All the inferior clerks were under the influence of the opposing candidate,

so that from them he could gain no assistance, nor in this condition of mind would it have availed him in the least, for he turned over the leaves as an automaton, with a perfect bewilderment and vacuity, as one under the power of a spell ; and this habit he continued, studying without perception, understanding, or instruction, and, in fact, in absolute, uninterrupted despair, every day for more than half a year.

Now here was enough to make almost any man insane, and it is wonderful that Cowper's mind did not sooner give way under this process. It is surprising that he could persevere so long in this mode of life, and keep up the appearance of hope and cheerfulness. And yet there is a most playful letter on record, written to Lady Hesketh in the very midst of all this torture. An absence at Margate, with the intermission of his painful employments, and a season of social enjoyment in a new scene, helped him to recover his spirits ; but still the terrible crisis was before him, and in October he had to return to the office, and renew his ineffectual labour, pressed by necessity on either side, with nothing but despair in prospect.

For this was the dilemma to which now his sensitive mind was reduced, either to keep possession of his office, and contest it to the last extremity, and, by so doing, expose himself to a public rejection for incompetency, or else to renounce it at once, and thus run the hazard of ruining his benefactor's right of appointment. The anguish of his perplexity was such that, sometimes in a fit of passion when alone, he would cry out aloud, and curse the hour of his birth, lifting up his eyes to heaven,

and exclaiming, "What sin have I committed to deserve this?" He could not pray, and would not attempt it, being firmly persuaded that God would not deliver him. But he consulted Dr Heberden, his physician, and dosed himself with drugs; and having found a prayer or two in what he called "that repository of self-righteousness and pharisaical lumber, 'The Whole Duty of Man,'" he repeated them a few nights, and then threw away the book, and all thoughts of God and of a remedy with it. His wretchedness was past hope and effort.

And now it could not be otherwise, these things continuing, than that the coil of his misery, indecision, and despair, should rapidly run his mind down to madness. He had, indeed a strong foreboding of it, and began to look upon madness as his only chance remaining. So earnestly did he desire it, that his grand fear now was that the failure of his senses would not come in time to excuse his appearance at the bar, and prevent the trial for the clerkship. But he was still in his senses as the day drew near; and, amid the flashes of the stormy horizon of his soul in that terrible tempest, the dark and dreadful purpose of self-murder began to disclose itself, at first dim, murky, and vanishing, then fixed and intimate, and entertained without shuddering. He began to reason that perhaps there might be no God, or the Scriptures might be false, and suicide nowhere forbidden, or that at the worst his misery in hell itself would be more supportable. Probably the state of mind of a self-murderer never before was disclosed with such dreadful truth and reality, if disclosed at all.

At first he resorted to laudanum, and one day in

November 1763, purchased a bottle of the poison, which he kept by him for a week, but was providentially, by one interposition after another, preserved from accomplishing his purpose. At length, the very morning before the day appointed for his public appearance at the bar of the House, he took up a newspaper in Richard's Coffee-house, where he was at breakfast, and read in it a letter which, in his disordered state of mind, seemed to him a libel intended for himself, and written by one acquainted with his circumstances, on purpose to hurry him on to the suicide he was contemplating. In reality, this delusion, itself sufficient proof that already he was insane, had that effect ; and after several ineffectual attempts, he arose the next morning, hearing the clock strike seven, and knowing that no more time was to be lost, bolted the inner door of his chamber, as he thought, and proceeded deliberately to the work of hanging himself by means of a garter made of a broad piece of scarlet binding with sliding buckles. He strained the noose tightly around his neck, and fastened it to the top of the bed-frame, but the iron bent and let him down. A second time he fastened it, but the frame broke short, and he fell again. A third time he fastened it on an angle of the door, and, pushing away the chair with his feet, hung at his whole length, till he lost all consciousness of existence, and knew nothing, till a feeling like that produced by a flash of lightning passed over his whole body, and he found himself fallen on his face upon the floor. The blood had stagnated under his eye, but by the mercy of God the cord broke before the strangulation was completed, and Cowper was saved.

And now ensued the most overwhelming conviction of guilt, though up to this time he had felt no anxiety of a spiritual kind ; the attempt at self-murder harrowed up his conscience, and a sense of God's wrath, and a deep despair of escaping it, instantly succeeded. The terrors of the Lord and his own iniquities set themselves in array against him. Every approach to the Scriptures was but an increase of his anguish, and, as in the case of Bunyan, the sword of the Spirit seemed to guard the tree of life from his touch, and flamed against him in every avenue of access. He was scared with visions and terrified with dreams, and by day and by night experienced a continual agony of soul. In every book that he took up he found something that struck him to the heart, and if he went into the street, he thought the people stared and laughed at him, and it seemed as if the voice of his own conscience was so loud that others must hear it. He bought a ballad of a person who was singing it in the street, because he thought it was written on himself. He now began to imagine that he had committed the unpardonable sin, and in this conviction gave himself up anew to despair. He says that he felt a sense of burning in his heart like that of real fire, and concluded it was an earnest of those eternal flames which would soon receive him. In this condition he remembered the kindness and piety of his friend the Rev. Martin Madan, and sent for him ; for though he used to think him an enthusiast, yet in this extremity of spiritual distress he felt that, if any one could lead and comfort him, it must be he. The good man brought him to the all-atoning blood of Christ, and presented the way of salvation in a manner so simple,

scriptural, and affecting, that Cowper wept freely with a sense of his ingratitude, and deplored his want of faith.

Cowper's brother from Cambridge was with him during that interview with Mr Madan. Most affectionately had Cowper's brother tried to comfort him, but in vain, though pierced to the heart at the sight of such anguish and despair as he found him in. Mr Madan and Cowper sat on the bedside together, and he affectionately presented the gospel to the gloomy sufferer, beginning with the lost condition of the sinner against God, as presented in his Word. In this, Cowper says, he began to feel something like hope dawning in his heart, for since the condition of all mankind was the same, it seemed to make his own state appear less desperate. Then, when presenting the all-atoning efficacy of the blood of Christ and his righteousness for our justification, from the same precious Scriptures, Cowper's heart began to burn within him, and his tears flowed freely. It was only when Mr Madan came to the necessity, on Cowper's own part, of a personal faith in the Lord Jesus, such as would embrace Christ as Paul had done, and say, "Who loved me, and gave himself for me," that Cowper found his heart failing, and deplored his want of such a faith, and could only sigh forth the prayer that God, whose gift it was, might bestow it upon him.

It was under the impression from this interview, and in the exercise of this sincere desire for faith, that Cowper seems to have passed from such an interval of light into thick darkness—darkness that might be felt. He slept, he says, three hours, but awoke in greater terror and agony than ever. The pains of hell got hold upon him, and the

sorrows of death encompassed him. The malady manifested its physical power, and shewed that it was winding up his nervous system rapidly to delirium. His hands and feet became cold and stiff; he was in a cold sweat; life seemed retreating; and he thought he was about to die. Notwithstanding the relief his wounded spirit had seemed to receive from its anguish, this paroxysm of nervous depression (extreme depression and extreme excitement apparently combined) increased upon him, till, after some hours of horrible and unspeakable anguish and dismay, a strange and dreadful darkness fell suddenly upon him. The sensation, as Cowper described it in his own Memoir, was as if a heavy blow had suddenly fallen on the brain, without touching the skull; so intensely painful, that Cowper clapped his hand to his forehead, and cried aloud. At every blow his thoughts and expressions became more wild and incoherent, till manifestly it was absolute and unmistakable insanity. From that moment, through the whole interval of madness, all that remained clear to him, he says, was the sense of sin, and the expectation of punishment. His mind was a profound chaos, brooded over by despair.

His brother instantly perceived this decisive change when it commenced, and, on consultation with his friends, it was determined that he should be carried, not to any retreat in London (for which resolution Cowper afterward praised God, deeming it a particular providence of His mercy), but to St Albans, and placed under the care of that humane, experienced, and excellent physician, and man of letters and of piety, Dr Cotton, with whom Cowper already had some acquaintance.

A few days before Cowper left London, his cousin Lady Hesketh, and Sir Thomas, visited him at his chambers in the Temple. It was just before the fearful paroxysm which has been described, and of which the signs were being developed in his deepening gloom. He neither looked at Lady Hesketh nor spoke to her during that interview, and he said in his heart, when she went out of the door, "Farewell ! There will be no more intercourse between us, forever !" In the first letter which he wrote to Lady Hesketh after the restoration of his reason, he referred to his unaccountable behaviour in that interview. "I remember I neither spoke to you nor looked at you. The solution of the mystery indeed followed soon after ; but at the time it must have been inexplicable. The uproar within was even then begun, and my silence was only the sulkiness of a thunder-storm before it opens. I am glad, however, that the only instance in which I knew not how to value your company was when I was not in my senses."

Cowper's brother, on his dying bed, described his feelings at the time of the interview with Cowper in the period of his mental distress in London. He would have given the universe, when he found him in such anguish and despair, to have administered some comfort to him, and tried every method of doing it, but found it impossible. He began to consider his sufferings as a judgment upon his brother, and his own inability to relieve them as a judgment upon himself. But when Mr Madan came in and spoke the precious consolations of the gospel to Cowper's agitated soul, he succeeded in a moment in calming him. This surprised Cowper's brother, for Mr

Madan had, in the name of Christ, and the message of his mercy to the chief of sinners, a key to Cowper's heart, which his brother had then neither gained nor knew how to use; but it no longer surprised him when the light had broken upon his mind, and the peace of God that passeth all understanding had filled his heart during his own sickness.

CHAPTER VI.

Cowper's conversion—The grace and glory of it.

DURING the period of Cowper's seclusion at St Albans, the tenderest and most skilful discipline, both for mind and body, was brought to bear upon him, but for many months to no apparent purpose. It was not that reason was dethroned, as in the first access of his insanity, but an immovable, impenetrable, awful gloom surrounded him, out of which it seemed as if he never would emerge. All this while, Cowper says, conviction of sin and expectation of instant judgment never left him from the 7th of December 1763, till the middle of July following; and for eight months all that passed might be classed under two heads—conviction of sin, and despair of mercy. Over the secrets of the prison-house he draws the vail, if indeed he remembered them; but even when he had so far regained his reason as to enter into conversation with Dr Cotton, putting on the aspect of smiles and merriment, he still carried the sentence of irrecoverable doom in his heart. The gloom continued, till a visit from his brother, in July 1764, seemed attended with a faint breaking of the cloud; and something like a ray of hope, in the midst of their conversation, shot into his heart.

And now, for the first time in a long while, he took up the Bible, which he found upon a bench in the garden where he was walking, but which he had long thrown aside, as having no more any interest or portion in it. The eleventh chapter of John, to which he opened, deeply affected him ; and though as yet the way of salvation was not beheld by him, still the cloud of horror seemed every moment passing away, and every moment came fraught with hope. It seemed at length like a spring-time in his soul, when the voice of the singing of birds might once more be heard, and a resurrection from death be experienced. And, indeed, God's time of mercy in Christ Jesus had now come. Seating himself in a chair near the window, and seeing a Bible there, Cowper once more took it up and opened it for comfort and instruction. And now the very first verse he fell upon was that most remarkable passage in the third chapter of Romans, that blessed third of Paul, as Bunyan would have called it, " Whom God had set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness through the remission of sins that are passed, through the forbearance of God." Immediately on reading this verse, the scales fell from his eyes, as in another case from Paul's, and, in his own language, " he received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon him." " I saw," says he, " the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fulness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I believed, and received the gospel. Whatever my friend Madan had said to me so long before, revived with all its clearness, with demonstration of the Spirit, and with power."

Now, this was a most complete and wondrous cure. Not more wondrous was that of the poor wild man of the mountains in Judea, of old possessed with devils, when brought to sit, clothed and in his right mind, at the feet of his Redeemer. The fever of the brain was quenched—those spectres with dragon wings that had brooded over the chaos of his soul, were fled for ever; the ignorance and darkness of an understanding blinded by the god of this world had been driven away before the mild, calm, holy light of a regenerated, illuminated, sanctified reason, in her white robe of humility and faith; and the anxious, restless, gloomy unbelief and despair of heart had given place to a sweet and rapturous confidence in Jesus. Oh, it were worth going mad many years, to be the subject of such a heavenly deliverance! The hand divine of the Great Physician, gentle and invisible, was in all this; the vail was taken from Cowper's heart, and the Lord of Life and Glory stood revealed before him; and when his soul took in the meaning of that grand passage in God's Word, it was a flood of heaven's light over his whole being. It was as sudden and complete an illumination as when the light shineth from one side of heaven to the other; and it was as permanent, through a long and blissful season of unclouded Christian experience, as when the sun shineth at noonday, or, in that other and more lovely image in the Word of God, as the sun's clear shining after rain. It was creative energy and beauty in the spiritual world, transcending the glory of the scene when God said, "*Let there be light*" in the material world.

But what *was* this sudden revelation? Assuredly Cowper had seen, had heard, had read, this passage before. Undoubtedly Mr Madan, himself an enlightened and

rejoicing Christian, must have presented it to him, and dwelt upon its meaning. Indeed, it had always been, in the speculation of the theological, and the experience of the Christian world, as marked a fixture and feature of truth and proof in Christian doctrine, as the sun is a radiant and reigning luminary in the heavens. And yet, Cowper had never beheld it before ! But now, on the verge of a region of darkness that can be felt, through which he had been struggling, he saw it suddenly, transportingly, permanently. How can this be accounted for ? What invisible influence or agent was busy in the recesses of Cowper's mind, arranging its scenery, withdrawing its clouds, preparing its powers of vision, and at the same time moving in the recesses of that profound passage, shining behind the letter of its phrases, as behind a vast transparency, and pouring through it, like a sudden creation, the imagery of heaven ? There is but one answer ; and this experience of Cowper's mind and heart is one of the most marked and wondrous instances on record, illustrative of his own exquisitely beautiful hymn, beginning,

" The SPIRIT breathes upon the WORD,
And brings the truth to sight."

It is one of the most precious demonstrations ever known of that passage in which the Apostle Paul describes his own similar experience, and that of all who are ever truly converted, " For God, who caused the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It was one of the most marvellous and interesting cases of this Divine Illumination in the whole history of Redemption.

Why had not Cowper seen all this before? Because, according to God's own answer, "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." These truths were as clearly truths, and as well known in speculation, before that hour, that moment, of the shining of heaven in his soul, as they ever were afterward. But as yet they had not been revealed by the Spirit. But the instant God thus interposed, then could Cowper exclaim with Paul, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God." First, the revelation of the things that are given, then the Spirit, that we might *know* them. And the reason why this Divine Illumination did not take place years before, was just because the vail was on the heart, and it had not turned to the Lord, that the vail might be taken away; and it pleased the sovereign blessed will and infinite wisdom and love of God to lead the subject of this mighty experience out of darkness into light by a gradual preparatory discipline. And yet, when the light came, it was as new, as surprising, as ecstatic, as the light of day to a man blind from his birth.

"Unless the Almighty arm had been under me," says he, "I think I should have died with gratitude and joy. My eyes filled with tears, and my voice choked with transport, I could only look to heaven in silence, overwhelmed with love and wonder. But the work of the Holy Spirit is best described in His own words—it was joy unspeakable, and full of glory. Thus was my Heavenly Father in Christ Jesus pleased to give me full

assurance of faith ; and out of a strong unbelieving heart to raise up a child unto Abraham. How glad should I now have been to have spent every moment in prayer and thanksgiving ! I lost no opportunity of repairing to a throne of grace, but flew to it with an eagerness irresistible, and never to be satisfied. Could I help it ? Could I do otherwise than to love and rejoice in my reconciled Father in Christ Jesus ? The Lord had enlarged my heart, and I ran in the ways of his commandments. For many succeeding weeks tears were ready to flow, if I did but speak of the gospel, or mention the name of Jesus. To rejoice day and night was my employment ; too happy to sleep much, I thought it was lost time that was spent in slumber. Oh that the ardour of my first love had continued ! ”

It was such a change, so bright, so sudden, so complete, so joyful, that at first his kind, Christian, and watchful physician, Dr Cotton, was almost alarmed lest it might terminate in frenzy ; but he soon became convinced of the sacred soundness and permanent blissfulness of the cure. Every morning of the year he visited his interesting and beloved patient ; and ever, in sweet communion, the gospel was the delightful theme of their conversation. What a history of passing hours within the apartments of an insane hospital ! Oh, if this were the theme of communion, and this the instrumentality of healing oftener employed, how many distressed, diseased, and wandering spirits might have been restored, that, neglected still, have wandered on till the wreck of reason became confirmed and hopeless ! The voice of Christ is the voice of true Science to every lunatic, “ Bring him hither to me.”

CHAPTER VII.

Cowper's survey of his own case—His removal to Huntingdon—His happy experience there—Scenes of the composition of his earliest hymns—Preparation for his work.

"ON the fever of the brain!" exclaimed Cowper, in one of his beautiful letters to Lady Hesketh, after his recovery; "to feel the quenching of that fire is indeed a blessing which I think it impossible to receive without the most consummate gratitude." "My affliction has taught me a road to happiness which, without it, I should never have found." Cowper then refers to the rumour which was put in circulation, and has not ceased in some hands to be passed as current from that day to this, although, like a counterfeit bill long in use, it is now nearly worn out, that his madness was the cause of his religion, instead of religion being the cure of his madness. He says, "It gives me some concern, though at the same time it increases my gratitude, to reflect that a convert made in Bedlam is more likely to be a stumbling-block to others than to advance their faith. But he who can ascribe an amendment of life and manners, and a reformation of the heart itself to madness, is guilty of an absurdity that in any other case would fasten the imputation of madness upon himself."

Cowper speaks of the belief, or rather the vain imagination entertained by multitudes, that a person needed no such change as that of conversion in order to be a Christian. "You think I always believed, and I thought so too; but you were deceived, and so was I. I called myself, indeed, a Christian; but *He who knows my heart knows that I never did a right thing, nor abstained from a wrong one, because I was so; but if I did either, it was under the influence of some other motive.*" This is a most impressive and searching remark; it goes to the inmost condition of every unchanged heart, the *native* condition of *every* heart; and it shews with what profound and thorough a sweep of analysis Cowper had been taught to survey the elements of his own character. He adds, "It is such seeming Christians, such pretending believers, that do most mischief in the cause of its enemies, and furnish the strongest arguments to support their infidelity. Unless profession and conduct go together, the man's life is a lie, and the validity of what he professes is itself called in question. The difference between a Christian and an unbeliever would be so striking, if the treacherous allies of the Church would go over at once to the other side, that I am satisfied religion would be no loser by the bargain."

In the survey of his case, Cowper rejoiced with gratitude in the providential care with which it pleased God to assign his treatment, not to any London physician, but to a man so affectionate and experienced as Dr Cotton. "I was not only treated by him with the greatest tenderness while I was ill, and attended with the utmost diligence, but when my reason was restored to me, and I had so much need of a religious friend to converse with, to

whom I could open my mind upon the subject without reserve, I could hardly have found a better person for the purpose. My eagerness and anxiety to settle my opinions on that long-neglected point, made it necessary that while my mind was yet weak and my spirits uncertain I should have some assistance. The doctor was as ready to administer relief in this article likewise, and as well gratified to do it as in that which was immediately his province. But how many physicians would have thought this an irregular appetite, and a symptom of remaining madness! But if it were so, my friend was as mad as myself, and it is well for me that he was so. My dear cousin, you know not half the deliverances I have received; *my brother is the only one in the family who does.* My recovery is, indeed, a signal one; and my future life must express my thankfulness, for by words I cannot do it."

The remark concerning Cowper's brother is exceedingly interesting and instructive, taken in connexion with his own remarkable conversion five years later. It was the sight and knowledge of what Cowper passed through—those depths of anguish and despair beneath the burden of his guilt in the valley of the shadow of death, where the kindest and most affectionate of brothers could do nothing for him, and could not even understand the causes of his gloom, or the means and the process of his recovery and joy—that began to awaken that brother's own suspicions that in his own case all was not right, and set him upon investigating the subject of religion with an attention he had never before paid to it, though he had been a clergyman of the Church of England, with a pastoral charge, for several years. This was not the least remark-

able of the chain of providences to which Cowper often reverted with adoring gratitude and love, though it was not known till the thrilling disclosures of his brother's conflicts, doubts, distresses, and, at length, rejoicing faith in his sick and dying hours, how God had been dealing with him and leading him onward. Cowper's brother had been but a weeping and helpless spectator in *his* trials; but Cowper himself had been prepared of God to be a ministering angel to the anguished spirit of his brother, when it came his turn to pass through the gloomy experience of condemnation under guilt, and afterward through death itself to life eternal. In many a sense Cowper could write—

“ Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain ;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.”

Rarely in the history of God's grace has there been a picture of such complete, unmingled, celestial peace and joy in believing, as seems to have filled the soul of Cowper, when it first pleased God to shine into his heart with “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The vail was taken away, and he beheld, with a happiness passing all power of description, the glory of the Lord, and was changed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord. Oh, that this might have lasted to the end! was his very natural wish concerning that season of ecstatic heavenly enjoyment.

And at first thought we are ready to repeat the same wish; but then comes the reflection that such is not God's discipline with us, nor, considering the way in which a

Christian is established and perfected or made useful, by any possibility *can* be ; and then, again, the remembrance that if it had thus continued the world could never have possessed, from Cowper at least, that sweetest and noblest of Christian poems, "The Task." It was a larger discipline of trials, and of spiritual sorrow intermingled, that must prepare the mind and heart of Cowper for the work God had for him to do. Other processes, deep, secret, unseen, unknown, were to pass within the soil, rough and painful at the time, and rarely resting, before it could be fitted for the creation of that precious fruit.

But if ever a saint on earth knew the whole meaning of that expression, *a first love*, it was Cowper. There was nothing, ever after, to surpass it. . The perfect day, even if Cowper had come to it on earth, and had continued to enjoy it, could never on earth have been arrayed in such intense, attractive loveliness, as the beauty, the peacefulness, the sweetness, the purity, and the heavenly colours of that morning without clouds, after a night of such blackness, driving tempest, and distracting madness and despair. It was this heavenly experience to which Cowper looks back with such mournful longings, in the most sacredly beautiful and widely known, perhaps, of all the hymns in our language :—

" Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord ?
Where is that soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and his Word ?

" What peaceful hours I once enjoy'd !
How sweet their memory still !
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill."

These two verses are a parenthesis of prayer, the full meaning of which, only he who wrote these stanzas, looking back to the blissfulness and glory of his earliest experience, could fully understand. But the yearning desire, Oh for a closer walk with God! is the breathing of every Christian heart.

In this serene and happy frame after his recovery, Cowper remained twelve months still with Dr Cotton at St Albans. Meanwhile he had resolved, by God's help, never to return to London, and for this purpose, that no obligation might rest upon him to resume his residence there, he resigned the office of Commissioner of Bankrupts, which he held at a salary of sixty pounds per annum, although this procedure left him with an income so small as to be hardly sufficient for his maintenance. His beloved brother resided at Cambridge, and at Cowper's desire made many unsuccessful attempts to procure for him a suitable dwelling in the neighbourhood of the University. Cowper now mentions a day in which, with great earnestness, he poured out his soul to God in prayer, beseeching him, that wherever it should please God in his fatherly mercy to lead him, it might be into the society of those who feared his name, and loved the Lord Jesus in sincerity and truth. What followed he regarded as a proof of God's gracious acceptance of that prayer, having received immediate information of lodgings taken for him at Huntingdon, about sixteen miles from Cambridge, where God, he says, like an indulgent father, had ordered every thing for him, and had prepared for him a more comfortable place of residence than he could have chosen for himself.

Thus, after more than eighteen months spent at St Albans, he set out for Cambridge and Huntingdon, taking with him an affectionate servant, who had watched over him during his whole illness, and who earnestly begged to be permitted still to be with him. He passed the whole time of the way in silent communion with God, and those hours, he says, were among the happiest he had ever known. "It is impossible to tell," is the strong language of Cowper, "with how delightful a sense of his protection and fatherly care of me it pleased the Almighty to favour me during the whole of my journey." In this happy frame of mind he took possession of his lodgings at Huntingdon, whither his brother accompanied him from Cambridge on Saturday, and then bade him farewell.

And now, like a little child left alone for the first time among strangers, his heart began to sink within him, and he wandered forth into the fields melancholy and desponding at the close of the day, but, like Isaac at eventide, found his heart so powerfully drawn to God that, having encountered a secluded spot beneath a bank of shrubbery and verdure, he kneeled down and poured out his whole soul in prayer and praise. It pleased the Saviour to hear him, and to grant him at once a renewed sense of his presence, a deliverance from his fears, and a sweet submissive assurance that wherever his lot might be cast, the God of all consolation would still be with him.

The next day was the Sabbath, and he attended church the first time since his recovery, and of course the first time for nearly two years, and he found the House of God to be the very gate to Heaven. He could scarcely restrain his emotions during the service, so fully did he

see the beauty of the glory of the Lord. A person, with whom he afterward became acquainted, sat near him, devoutly engaged in the exercises of Divine Worship, and Cowper beholding him, loved him for the earnestness of his manner. "While he was singing the Psalms," Cowper says, "I looked at him, and observing him intent upon his holy employment, I could not help saying in my heart, with much emotion, The Lord bless you for praising Him whom my soul loveth."

Oh, this was the very spirit and temper of the saints and angels in glory; and, indeed, such was the goodness of the Lord to Cowper, that though his own voice was stopped in silence by the very intensity of his feeling, yet his soul sang within him, and leaped for joy. By the good providence of God, the reading of the Gospel for the day happened to be the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and Cowper felt the whole scene realised within himself, and acted over in his own heart; and the joy and power of the Word of God, with that heart thus quickened by the Holy Spirit to receive it, were more than he could well support. He hastened immediately after church to that solitary place in the fields where he had found such sacred enjoyment in prayer the day before, and now he found that even *that* was but the earnest of a richer blessing. "How," exclaims Cowper, "shall I express what the Lord did for me, except by saying that he made all his goodness to pass before me? I seemed to speak to Him face to face, as a man converseth with his friend, except that my speech was only in tears of joy and groanings which cannot be uttered. I could say indeed, with Jacob,

not how dreadful, but how lovely is this place ! this is none other than the house of God ! ”

There, in this sacred spot, and in the deep delight of such devout and blissful experience, is the very locality and atmosphere of that perfectly beautiful hymn which Cowper wrote, entitled “ Retirement.” There was the calm retreat ; there the unwitnessed praise ; there the peace, and joy, and love ; there the holy discipline of communion with the Saviour, by which He prepared His servant to pour forth the gratitude of a redeemed spirit in strains which would be sung by the Church of God on earth till the whole Church sing in heaven. If all of Cowper’s sufferings and joy had yielded but the fruit of that one hymn, it had been cheaply purchased. God ordained him those sufferings, and gave him those seasons of mercy, that he might write it. But that was not the only fruit, though perhaps the most perfect, of such heavenly experience ; and God was now preparing, not only the inward frame, but the external circumstances of His chosen child, for that unexampled, exquisite, and important work of Christian Poetry which He had for him to accomplish.

CHAPTER VIII.

First acquaintance and domestication with the Unwin family—Removal to Olney, and intimate friendship with Newton—Cowper's active and benevolent religious habits—Composition of the Olney Hymns.

FOR some months after he had taken lodgings in Huntingdon, he was very closely retired from society, having little more than the visits of his beloved brother from Cambridge, who, as it afterwards appeared, was himself, even then, blindly groping for the way of life, though not willing to acknowledge it. With him, as often as Cowper saw him, which was once or twice a-week, he conversed on the leading themes of the Gospel, though for five years the arguments and experience of Cowper seemed to have little effect upon him. Except these visits, and those of one or two acquaintances, whom Cowper playfully described in his letter to his cousin, Lady Hesketh, as odd, scrambling fellows like himself, he had little intercourse with the neighbours, but increasing communion with his God in Christ Jesus. With Him his solitude was sweet, and the "wilderness blossomed as the rose." "I am much happier," said he, in a letter to Major Cowper, "than the day is long, and sunshine and candlelight alike see me perfectly contented."

But God had still a sweeter change for him, and under the sanction and the power of prayer, by the direct guiding providence of God he was unexpectedly brought into an intimate friendship, which fixed the whole course and habitation of his future life. There had been settled for many years in Huntingdon an interesting and delightful Christian family, consisting of the Rev. Mr Unwin, a worthy divine, somewhat advanced in years, his wife, an accomplished, intelligent, and admirable woman, and their two children, a son and daughter. William Cawthorne Unwin, the son, was at this time about twenty-one years of age, and a student at Cambridge, looking forward to the ministry. Being irresistibly attracted, while in Huntingdon, by Cowper's appearance at church and in his solitary walks, he at length gained his acquaintance; and to his inexpressible joy, Cowper found in him a sharer in his own most intimate feelings of devotion, and one whom the Lord had been training from his infancy to the service of the temple. After their very first interview and interchange of hearts, Cowper prayed God, who had been the author, to be the guardian of their friendship, and to give it fervency and perpetuity even unto death. An introduction to the family immediately followed, and this was the beginning of that precious and invaluable Christian friendship with Mrs Unwin, which was to last through life, connecting the two in an existence of endearment so affectionate, so singularly intimate, yet so pure, so disinterested, so heavenly, that nothing can be found in mortal story to compare with it.

At the outset, Cowper thanked God for those Christian friends as his choicest external blessing, though as yet he

had no thought of any thing further than a friendly intercourse with the family as a neighbour. But after four months had passed in his solitary lodgings, he one day found his mind beclouded with darkness, and that intimate communion he had so long been enabled to maintain with God was suddenly interrupted. Almost as suddenly it occurred to him, and in a manner which made him ascribe it to the divine suggesting providence of the same gracious Lord who had brought him to Huntingdon, that he might possibly find a place in Mr Unwin's family as a boarder. A young gentleman who had been residing there as a pupil, had gone the day before to Cambridge, and Cowper thought it possible he might be permitted to succeed him. It shews in how sensitive and precariously delicate a state his mind then was, and how much he needed the soothing care and tenderness of confiding Christian friends, that from the moment this thought struck him, he was in such a tumult of anxious solicitude that for some days he could not direct his mind to any other subject. At length, after much prayer and no little conflict and distress in the fear and sense of unsubmitiveness to God's will, in case the blessing should not be granted, his heart was calmed, the negotiation was entered into with the Unwins, and he became the happiest inmate of their domestic circle.

Nearly two years ran on uninterrupted, in sweet social and Christian enjoyment and growth in grace, when Mr Unwin, the head of the family, was thrown from his horse, and most suddenly and unexpectedly hurried into eternity. This overwhelming affliction was followed by a change in the abode of the whole family from Huntingdon to Olney,

the dwelling-place and scene of the pastoral labours of one of the most eminent men of God then living, John Newton; a man fitted to commune with, and guide, and bless the mind and heart of Cowper, in his progress on the way to heaven, even through the valley of the shadow of death. By the same divine providence that had so remarkably led them both thus far, the steps of Newton, at that time a stranger to Cowper, were directed to his abode a few days after the calamitous event of Mr Unwin's death. The proposal was then suggested for the removal of the residence of the family to Olney; and the thing having been resolved upon, Newton engaged for them a house near his own dwelling, to which they removed the 14th of October 1767. There Cowper spent near twenty years of mingled sorrow and joy; there first his poetical powers were fully developed; there he passed through unfathomed abysses of darkness and despair; and there, under the discipline of God's hand, and the guidance of God's grace, the most precious and perfect fruit of his genius bloomed and was ripened.

Of the providences by which the intimate friendship between Cowper and Newton was established, the latter beautifully spoke in his preface to the first published volume of Cowper's poetry, declaring at the same time his own estimate of the value of that friendship. "By these steps," says Newton, "the good hand of God, unknown to me, was providing for me one of the principal blessings of my life; a friend and a counsellor, in whose company for almost seven years, though we were seldom seven successive hours separated, I always found new pleasure; a friend who was not only a comfort to myself, but a blessing to

the affectionate poor people among whom I then lived." At a still later period of their friendship, indeed, after the death of Cowper, and in a memoir of the poet which Newton began to write, but never finished, he speaks of him as follows: "For nearly twelve years we were seldom separated for twelve hours at a time, when we were awake and at home: the first six I passed in daily admiring and attempting to imitate him; during the second six, I walked pensively with him in the valley of the shadow of death." Again he gives us a vivid and bright glimpse of Cowper's habits of life during those six delightful years especially, while almost without a cloud he walked in the light of his Redeemer's countenance. "He loved the poor. He often visited them in their cottages, conversed with them in the most condescending manner, sympathised with them, counselled and comforted them in their distresses; and those who were seriously disposed were often cheered and animated by his prayers."

It is with a singular feeling, combining a mixture of astonishment, admiration, anxiety, doubt, and most affectionate religious interest, that the mind presents to itself a picture of the poet Cowper engaging in those social religious duties. Remembering the period of madness he had passed through, and the sensitive shyness of his nature, the instinctive and habitual abhorrence with which he shrank from any thing approximating to any public exposure of himself or his feelings, we tremble for him as in imagination we see him in the social prayer-meeting and at the bedside of the sick, engaging in exercises which afterward, for the greater period of his life, from the recurrence of his malady, no power on earth could have pre-

vailed with him to undertake. And the fact that it was then and for so long a time the choice of his heart and the happiness of his life to engage in those duties, shews as convincingly as his own description of the early blessedness he knew in communion with his Saviour, how commanding, absorbing, triumphant, and complete the work of Divine grace had been with him. It could transfigure even such a timid, shrinking, trembling nature, just emerged from the terrific and tremendous gloom of absolute insanity, into a fearless and sympathising angel of mercy.

The errands of such an angel might have been deemed too arduous for a mind so finely toned, so easily thrown from its balance, and disposed to a mental disorder so terrible and unfathomable. But not the least evil result ever seems to have followed from these habits, these efforts; though at first it could not but have been a painful task to Cowper to step forth from the depths of his retirement on any social mission whatever. But Mr Newton was with him, and their prayers and Christian confidence, communion and enjoyment, were as the exercises of one mind; and beyond question the discipline proved a most strengthening and beneficial one both to his intellect and heart. At any rate it was his Saviour's dealing with him; it was the same Divine wisdom that led the same heavenly Physician to appoint the restored madman from his wanderings among the tombs in Judea to an instant and difficult mission among the wild and wicked sinners of Decapolis. But Cowper's was a gentle, mild, and quiet walk of mercy among the sorrowing and the poor. Beyond a doubt the discipline of such kindly ministrations had a blessed minis-

tering quality upon himself, as well as the discipline of his own sorrows, in enriching and baptizing his poetical genius, and preparing him with a wider and more varied experience for the composition of "The Task."

The happy years of his life at Huntingdon and Olney, between 1765, the period of his recovery from the awful gloom and despair of his first madness, and 1773, the period of the first recurrence of that dread mysterious malady, were the time of the composition of the "Olney Hymns." And if Cowper had never given to the Church on earth but a single score of those exquisite breathings of a pious heart and creations of his own genius, it had been a bequest worth a life of suffering to accomplish. The dates, or nearly such, of some of those pieces were preserved, so that we are enabled to trace them to the frames and circumstances of the writer's mind and heart, and to see in them an exact reflection of his own experience. The very first that he composed after his recovery at St Albans, is said to have been the beautiful hymn entitled "The Happy Change," of which the two following stanzas are sweetly descriptive of his own restoration :—

"How blest Thy creature is, O God,
When, with a single eye,
He views the lustre of Thy Word,
The day-spring from on high !

"The soul, a dreary province once
Of Satan's dark domain,
Feels a new empire form'd within,
And owns a heavenly reign."

But the second strain, in which he poured forth an experience of joy unspeakable and full of glory—"Far from the world, O Lord, I flee"—is sweeter still ; indeed, beyond

comparison more perfect : it is exquisitely, sacredly, devoutly beautiful. The last of those compositions is said to have been the hymn beginning, "God moves in a mysterious way;" and there is a sublimity of interest attached to it, besides the native grandeur and beauty of the piece, because we are assured that it was suggested and framed under a presentiment of his recurring darkness and insanity of mind. He had been meditating, and doubtless praying, in one of his accustomed solitary walks in the open fields, when that foreboding impression fell upon him; but before it deepened into the black unfathomable gloom that his soul apprehended, he composed that most touching expression of his confidence in God and resignation to the Divine will. It was beneath the distant thunder of that impending tempest, and by its gloomy lightning, that he wrote the words—

"He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm."

And even in that foreboding, ominous state of mind, which was followed indeed by the darkness of an almost total eclipse for three years, and a suspension of his powers and a lurid gloom for near four years longer, he closed the hymn with that confiding prediction—

"God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain."

Could ever mortal under more sublime and affecting circumstances utter the words, "My times are in Thy hands!" That hymn was entitled "Light Shining out of Darkness." Never could Cowper have composed it at such a period, had he not previously been instructed, subdued, and disciplined, and taught the exercise of a lasting and submis-

sive faith through all changes, by an experience of the deepest sorrow and the sweetest joy. It was an experience which we find recorded in such hymns as that entitled "Afflictions Sanctified by the Word," closing with that sweet stanza—

"I love Thee, therefore, O my God,
And breathe toward Thy dear abode;
Where, in Thy presence fully blest,
Thy chosen saints for ever rest."

And in that entitled "Looking Upward in a Storm," and beginning—

"God of my life, to Thee I call;
Afflicted at Thy feet I fall;
When the great water-floods prevail
Leave not my trembling heart to fail."

And in that entitled "Peace after a Storm," containing the stanza—

"O let me then at length be taught
What I am still so slow to learn,
That God is love, and changes not,
Nor knows the shadow of a turn."

And in that entitled "Temptation," and beginning, "The billows swell, the winds are high," and ending with the stanza—

"Though tempest-toss'd, and half a wreck,
My Saviour through the floods I seek,
Let neither wind nor stormy main
Force back my shatter'd bark again."

Out of the same experience grew the hymn on "Submission :"—

"O Lord, my best desire fulfil."

And there is one of painful interest, entitled, "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," expressive of the sadness and dismay of the soul beneath the smoke and fiery arrows that reach their mark in the throbbing heart, and fill it with

inexpressible anguish. There are others that describe with equal power, and a serene and melodious harmony of joy, the peace and happiness of the soul in believing, and the sudden and surprising light that rises out of gloom upon the Christian, as a season of clear shining after rain. The whole collection, both of Newton's and of Cowper's hymns, is admirable ; but the tracing of the path of Cowper's genius and piety by what may be called *the trail of his sufferings*, is one of the most interesting and endearing investigations in all the records of biography.

Some of these hymns should be read in immediate connexion with Cowper's own description of his religious experience ; such as those entitled, "Praise for Faith ;" the "Heart Healed and Changed by Mercy ;" the hymn on "Retirement ;" the "Happy Change." Indeed, they all grew out of experience. The theology in these hymns, the sense they express of dependence on God, the way in which Divine Grace reveals the Saviour, the knowledge of the heart, and its heavenly healing, the native blindness, and the new created light, and the power of spiritual vision, the divine discipline, both of providence and grace, the various moods and dangers of the Christian conflict, the yearnings of the heart after God and heaven, and the fervent love of Christ, and affectionate confiding faith in his blood,—all are taught by the Divine Spirit ; nothing is at second hand. We have the graphic picture of Cowper's own Christian life, the life of faith, and its conflicts too, which are parts so essential of its life ; we have its formation, its happiness, and its trials. Some of Cowper's hymns are very much like Newton's ; as, for example, the familiar but graphic and most truthful description he has

given, in such brief compass, of the sinner's legal blindness and gracious deliverance. We quote it, because it is really a rapid sketch of his own case, his own history :—

“Sin enslaved me many years,
And led me bound and blind,
Till at length a thousand fears
Came swarming o'er my mind.
Where, said I in deep distress,
Will these sinful pleasures end ?
How shall I secure my peace,
And make the Lord my friend ?

“Friends and ministers said much
The gospel to enforce ;
But my blindness still was such,
I choose a legal course ;
Much I fasted, watch'd, and strove,
Scarce would shew my face abroad,
Fear'd almost to speak or move,
A stranger still to God.

“Thus, afraid to trust His grace,
Long time did I rebel,
Till, despairing of my case,
Down at His feet I fell.
Then my stubborn heart He broke,
And subdued me to His sway
By a single word He spoke—
'Thy sins are done away.'”

How beautiful, as an experimental hymn, drawn in like manner from his own history, is the one entitled, “My Soul Thirsteth for God ;” also the one entitled “Dependence ;” also, “The New Convert ;” and “The Welcome Cross ;” and “The Exhortation to Prayer ;” and “Jesus Hastening to Suffer ;” and “The Waiting Soul ;” and that affecting hymn entitled, “Looking Upward in a Storm,” so similar to the equally graphic hymn on “Temptation.” Let us select this as an example of the tone of sadness and depression that prevails in some of these outpourings of

Cowper's heart, and contrast the criticism of Southey that it was dangerous to the poet, considering the mental malady under which he had suffered, to be engaged in writing on such subjects ! Southey seemed to regard every expression of grief on account of sin, and of anguish under its burden—every lamentation of insensibility—and every tone of mourning on account of prevailing unbelief and darkness, as an indication that Cowper was again upon the verge of madness. He could not, or would not, understand either the joy or the grief of Cowper's Christian experience ; a vivid and desolate experience, indeed, it would have been if destitute of both ; yet to this frigid condition must it have been reduced, in order to escape the charge of a feverish enthusiasm. The heart that has learned neither understanding nor sympathy in the Christian conflict can have known little of Christianity itself—little or nothing of a true Christian experience. What sweeter internal evidence of the genuineness and depth of Cowper's piety can we conceive than the pathetic pleadings of his soul poured forth in stanzas like the following :—

“ God of my life, to Thee I call,
Afflicted at Thy feet I fall ;
When the great water-floods prevail,
Leave not my trembling heart to fail !

“ Friend of the friendless and the faint !
Where should I lodge my deep complaint ?
Where, but with Thee, whose open door
Invites the helpless and the poor !

“ Did ever mourner plead with Thee
And Thou refuse that mourner's plea ?
Does not the word still fix'd remain
That none shall seek Thy face in vain ?

“ That were a grief I could not bear,
Didst Thou not hear and answer prayer ;

But a prayer-hearing, answering God
Supports me under every load.

"Fair is the lot that's cast for me ;
I have an Advocate with Thee ;
They whom the world caresses most
Have no such privilege to boast.

"Poor though I am, despised, forgot,
Yet God, my God, forgets me not ;
And he is safe, and must succeed,
For whom the Lord vouchsafes to plead."

The unhappy, ill-natured, almost malignant tone sometimes assumed by Southey in his criticisms on Cowper's malady, and in his remarks on the tender religious sympathy and care of his friends, reminds us of Saul, under the gloom of an evil spirit, casting javelins at Jonathan and David. The perversity of prejudice, almost making a fool of the critic, even in the very sphere in which he prided himself on his superior discrimination, has rarely ever been displayed so grossly as in the following paragraph in regard to the Olney Hymns, and Newton's influence over Cowper:—"Mr Thornton took a thousand copies for distribution ; but Cowper's influence would never have been extended beyond the sphere in which those hymns circulated, *and would have been little there*, if he himself had continued under the influence of Mr Newton. Mr Newton would not have thought of encouraging him to exercise his genius in any thing but devotional poetry ; and he found it impossible to engage him again in that, because of the unhappy form which his hallucination had assumed."

If Cowper had never written a single line beyond the four or five hymns in the Olney Collection, beginning, "The Spirit breathes upon the Word," "Far from the world, O Lord, I flee," "Oh for a closer walk with God,"

“God moves in a mysterious way,” and “There is a fountain filled with blood,” the gift of those four or five hymns to the Church of God by Cowper’s sanctified genius, through Newton’s instrumentality, would have been a greater and more precious gift for literature and religion, perhaps, than all his biographer’s voluminous writings put together. Be this as it may, there is no apology that can be given for the distorting and discolouring bitterness with which the attempt has sometimes been made to caricature such piety as was manifested in the experience and life of Christians like Wesley, Whitefield, Lady Huntingdon, Newton, and Cowper.

CHAPTER IX.

Mystery and meaning of the Divine discipline with Cowper—His account of himself—Instructive interest of the autobiography.

No name in the annals of literature inspires a deeper personal interest than that of Cowper. A mystery still hangs around the malady that shrouded his mind in gloom, deepened at intervals into madness. It was a mystery quite impenetrable before the publication of his own memoir of his remarkable conversion; a memoir that brings us to a point where the rest of his life and his personal experiences are clearly traced by his own letters. These form the most interesting collection to be found in any literature in the world. Not only the origin and progress of his various literary designs, and of the productions of his genius, but the different phases of his mental disorder, are to be traced step by step. It is the investigation of that derangement, so peculiar, so continued, so profound, that forms the province of deepest interest in the study of his biography; an investigation disclosing scenes of the Divine providence in man's discipline, most solemn and instructive.

In one of his letters to his friend Unwin, Cowper quoted a Latin adage that he remembered, which he said would

have made a good motto for his poem of "Retirement"—*Bene vixit qui bene latuit*—he has lived well who has been wisely hidden. It might be applied to Cowper's whole life, withdrawn by Divine Providence from the busy world, but especially to that part of it so sweetly hid with Christ in God, when Cowper first fled from the world and abode beneath the shadow of the Almighty. God withdrew him from society to prepare him for the work he had appointed for him to accomplish.

In the third book of "The Task," entitled "The Garden," there occurs that exquisitely beautiful and affecting passage, which Cowper himself has noted, in the argument to the book, with the words, *Some account of myself*. It has been a thousand times read, a thousand times quoted, yet the thousandth time with not less interest than before :—

"I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
 Long since ; with many an arrow deep infix'd
 My panting side was charged, when I withdrew
 To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
 There was I found by One who had Himself
 Been hurt by the archers. In His side He bore,
 And in His hands and feet, the cruel scars.
 With gentle force soliciting the darts,
 He drew them forth, and heal'd, and bade me live.
 Since then, with few associates, in remote
 And silent woods I wander, far from those
 My former partners of the peopled scene :
 With few associates, and not wishing more.
 Here much I ruminate, as much I may,
 With other views of men and manners now
 Than once, and others of a life to come.
 I see that all are wanderers ; gone astray
 Each in his own delusions ; they are lost
 In chase of fancied happiness, still wooed,
 And never won. . Dream after dream ensues ;
 And still they dream that they shall still succeed,
 And still are disappointed. Rings the world

With the vain stir. I sum up half mankind
 And add two-thirds of the remaining half,
 And find the total of their hopes and fears
 Dreams, empty dreams. The million flit as gay
 As if created only like the fly,
 That spreads his motley wings in the eye of noon,
 To sport their season, and be seen no more.
 The rest are sober dreamers, grave and wise,
 And pregnant with discoveries new and rare.

* * * * *

Ah! what is life, thus spent? and what are they,
 But frantic, who thus spend it, all for smoke?
 Eternity for bubbles proves at last
 A senseless bargain. When I see such games
 Play'd by the creatures of a Power who swears
 That He will judge the earth, and call the fool
 To a sharp reckoning that has lived in vain:
 And when I weigh their seeming wisdom well,
 And prove it in the infallible result
 So hollow and so false, I feel my heart
 Dissolve in pity, and account the learn'd,
 If this be learning, most of all deceived.
 Great crimes alarm the conscience, but it sleeps,
 While thoughtful man is plausibly amused.
 Defend me, therefore, common sense, say I,
 From reveries so airy, from the toil
 Of dropping buckets into empty wells,
 And growing old in drawing nothing up."

We derive the materials for this continued investigation from Cowper himself. Up to the period of his recovery from the first attack of madness, and the time of his serene and happy settlement in Huntingdon, we have his own life, and the movements of his mind and heart, recorded by himself with a good degree of minuteness, and a faithful, unsparing severity of moral self-judgment. From that period to the second access of mental disorder and profound gloom, we have his own letters, the Olney Hymns, and that very important development of his life unintentionally afforded in his own deeply interesting and affecting

memoir of the life, conversion, and death of his beloved brother at Cambridge. The autobiography, in which the whole and only correct account of his first insanity is contained, with all that led to it, and all that followed it, forms one of the most thrilling, instructive, and valuable pieces of a similar nature, next to Bunyan's "Grace Abounding," to be found in the English language. Indeed, in some respects it is even more wonderful than that, and equally precious as a record of the grace of God. It was written by Cowper in an interval of clear light, in the enjoyment of the presence of the Saviour, in the serenest peace of mind, in the exercise of an unclouded judgment passing sentence on the transactions that rose before his memory.

It is the only revelation of the dealings of Divine providence and grace, the only solution of otherwise unmingled, insolvable mysteries or contradictions. Neglecting or concealing that revelation, men have attempted to charge Cowper's lunacy of mind upon what they have called the gloom or fanaticism of his evangelical belief and experience. But the autobiography and the letters, instead of throwing the blame of his madness on the type or the fervour of his religion, cast that burden wholly and distinctly on his state of prayerlessness, impenitence, unbelief, and alienation from God, and present his religious experience as the only cure of his mental malady, the only lasting relief from his misery and darkness. They shew that religious anxiety had nothing to do with exciting Cowper's derangement, or producing it at its origin, or exasperating it when developed; but, on the contrary, that the suicidal despair, which was the result of a complication of dis-

tresses of mind, heart, sensibilities, and nervous system, from which all religious impressions were absolutely excluded, was itself, when God had spared his life, the overruled and merciful occasion of his first salutary, deep conviction of sin; was indeed the cause of an entire change in the position of his being, such a change as brought him at length to a calm, submissive resting on the bosom of his Saviour, a release from darkness into the light of heaven, and a serene enjoyment and exercise both of reason and of faith.

Now this whole account was for a long time unknown, unpublished, hidden. Some men were aware of its existence, but Cowper's own biographers ignored it, and preferred to leave the subject of his madness enveloped in a mystery that permitted those who hated evangelical truth and piety to set it down to the score of religious fanaticism and bigotry. Others contradicted it, and refused to take the testimony of Cowper himself as to the character of his unregenerate life, as to the absolute irreligion of the whole of it, until there ensued the mighty change in his feelings and habits wrought by Divine grace. They could not bear to relinquish Cowper's exquisite mind and nature as having needed any supernatural influence to constitute it a Christian nature, or as having really been the subject of that vulgar fanatical experience called conversion. They projected the idea of the interesting, timid, sensitive being, whom they had known only through his poetry, or the wide circle of his admiring friends, back upon the period of his early life; and they scorned the thought of such a want of charity as to suppose that such an innocent being could, in his right mind, have accused himself of deserving

God's displeasure. They choose still to presevere in the accustomed cant of infidelity and formalism, which shrugged its shoulders and turned up its nose at the mention of experimental piety, and reasoned upon Cowper's own religious experience as part of his monomania or madness, exasperated if not inflicted by injudicious theological advisers.

Now, this is a very general and natural delusion. Nevertheless, whatever of supposed piety there may be, whatever of unsullied purity of life, whatever of outward morality, whatever of seeming loveliness of character, we know that it is vain and delusive, unless the heart has been humbled before God and brought to the acceptance of His grace, as free, undeserved grace to a guilty, lost sinner. There is no real piety, no true sanctity of life, no real holiness, until God's mercy in Christ, God's mercy to the guilty and the lost, has been sought and received in God's own way, by a humble, broken heart and contrite spirit. But our natural pride is wholly averse from such a procedure and opposed to it. And yet that pride itself may be effectually concealed from one's own view, if there has not been a self-searching and self-knowledge of sin and depravity, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, in the light of the spirituality of God's law. There have been men who seemed naturally to have all the humility and docility of children, learned men without any of the pride of learning, modest and unassuming, and of highest integrity and honourable feeling in all the business of society and intercourse of life, who have, nevertheless, denied and rejected with indignation the necessity of self-abasement and self-loathing at the feet of the Saviour, and the truth of the

worthlessness of human virtues without faith in His redemption, and reliance upon that alone.

But in such very indignation at the imputation of utter worthlessness to what is assumed as human virtue ; indignation, as if the noblest qualities were despised, belied, and libelled ; in that very indignation which seems to the deluded mind but a noble fervour of admiration for what is admirable in mankind, and the defence of humanity itself from slander, there is the plain development of the sin by which the angels fell ; the pride that challenges the regard of God himself for pretended human goodness, and demands the mercy of God on account of such goodness, and not merely on account of Christ. But, as Cowper remarked in one of his letters, mercy *deserved* ceases to be mercy, and must take the name of justice. Here, then, must the purest being come where Cowper came—here the most unsullied soul, the loveliest and most amiable nature, the strictest and most virtuous moralist, to this position at the foot of the cross, on a level with the most miserable publicans and harlots, or there is no piety and no salvation. Let this be understood, or nothing in the gospel is understood rightly. We know nothing truly of Christ, or the way of salvation, till we know Him in the self-abasement of a contrite spirit.

It might have been expected that at so late a period as 1836, such a biographer as Southey, with Cowper's own memoir, and the whole series of his letters in full before him, would not have stooped to join in the hunt with such sneering infidelity. Yet we find him writing strange things in reference both to Cowper's own religious enjoyment, which it was intimated was delusive, and ought

not to have been sustained as true, and also to the influence of those dear Christian friends, among whom Mrs Unwin and John Newton were the most intimate, who rejoiced with him in his religious joy. Southey argues that they ought to have discouraged that joy as an illusion, and that their not taking that course, but, on the contrary, confirming him in the belief that his happiness was the work of God's grace, prevented their having any power afterward to comfort him in gloom, and dispossess him of the delusions of despair. They encouraged him at first in what Southey intimates were false raptures of piety, the work of an insane mind, and the consequence was that they could do nothing with him to dissipate his darkness, when the clouds came upon him, or to convince him that his despair also was a false despair. Because they did not in the first case believe, and labour to make Cowper believe, that the light and grace of that ecstatic blessedness which he knew when first he saw the Lord, were a mere illusive fancy, the heat of a mere delusive imagination, therefore they could not in the last case persuade him or encourage him to believe that the gloom and blackness of a despairing soul were of the same imaginary nature. The argument is, that if they had denied the grace and light at first to have been from heaven, they might have persuaded him afterward that the darkness and despair were only a dream from hell; but that, having encouraged him in a lie at first, as from heaven, they could not dispossess him of the lie afterward as from hell. Such, says Southey, "are the perilous consequences of religious enthusiasm. He had been encouraged to believe that there was nothing illusive in the raptures of his

first recovery; and they who had confirmed him in that belief argued in vain against his illusions when they were of an opposite character." A singularly wise physician of a madhouse would a writer like this have made! One cannot help reflecting how fearful from the outset must have been the result, had the care of Cowper's soul fallen into the same hands with that of his memory.

CHAPTER X.

The cure by Divine grace—The mental malady made subservient, by such grace, to a sweeter poetry—Secret of the all-ruling charm of Cowper's poetry.

THE autobiography of the poet is a demonstration that nothing but Divine grace effected the completion and permanence of Cowper's cure, and that nothing but the ministrations of the Spirit of God preserved his mind from utter ruin. We say completion and permanence; and in the best sense, the true, eternal sense, such *was* the cure. Cowper could say, though "I walk in the midst of trouble, Thou wilt revive me. The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me." Those heavenly ministrations, having renewed his heart, and sanctified the fountain of principle and feeling, enabled him to write with all the sweetness and glory of a piety kindled at the cross, even at the very time when, through the partial prevalence of his mental malady, his own personal Christian hope was in a state of suspended animation. For more reasons than one, if it had not been for Cowper's piety, we should never have had his poetry. His sweet religious experience was a quiet harbour, a serene and lovely nook, into which the shipwrecked mind was guided, that otherwise would, by the ragged reefs and waves, have been quite

dashed in pieces. There in that undisturbed retirement he lived as a mental and spiritual Robinson Crusoe, cut off from the great world, in a solitude peopled mainly by his own affections. His mental malady indeed returned at intervals ; it deepened and darkened at the end of life, till beneath its thickest gloom he went down into the grave. He could say with Job, " I have made my bed in the darkness, and on mine eyelids is the shadow of death ;" and in truth no small portion of his life was a passage through the valley of that dread shadow. But his spiritual malady had been cured for ever, and the vision of his soul had been purified, so that never again did he see through the eye of this world merely, nor ever again did that madness return upon him, which Divine inspiration hath assured us is in the hearts of all men naturally while they live, who live astray from God.

From that madness he had been completely redeemed, and to that glorious redemption he owed it, beyond all doubt, that the recurrence of the mental disease did not swallow up everything. He lived in the light of heaven for many years ; eight years may be called many in a life of such experience as his ; he lived that space of time *at once*, almost uninterrupted, in serene enjoyment of religious peace, with great delight in religious duties, in habits of communion with his God and his Saviour, the sacredness and sweetness of which only his own exquisite poetry could delineate. To the power so gained, the habits so formed, the grace so long baptizing him, he owed the enjoyment and heavenly exercise of his mental faculties, even when he seemed to himself as a spectre shrouded in mental gloom. All that while, his sun was not withdrawn, but

though clouds and darkness intercepted its light, so that he had little or no comfort and joy of its direct shining, yet his life went on beneath its sanctifying influence, and the productions of his genius grew in its holy radiance. A gloomy day, though not a day of *sunshine*, is still a day of *sunlight*; a *day*, because the sun has risen, and is running his appointed course; and though the eye may not behold him, yet the life of nature plays beneath his power.

Moreover, not only was it the regeneration of Cowper's heart, and his first enjoyment of the "peace of God that passeth all understanding," that preserved his mind from utter shipwreck, but it was Divine grace that transfigured and created anew his native genius. By no possibility could he ever, in the exercise of his native powers, had they not been supernaturally illuminated, have accomplished what he did, not even if his mind had always been as serene and sane as Shakspeare's, though no shadow of eclipse had darkened his reason, nor any cloud of gloom disturbed his mental faculties. The glory of another world, not this, shines through his poetry, and by the inspiration of a higher grace than that of native genius merely, his imagination was raised to behold it, or rather its glory fell upon his imagination through the vision of his heart.

And, in truth, it is the religion of Cowper's poetry that constitutes its grand all-ruling charm, even with the irreligious world, though many would not be willing to acknowledge it. The sweet religious influence surrounds and pervades it like an atmosphere. It is an atmosphere so serene, so sacred, so transparent, that the commonest

scenery is rendered beautiful and attractive by it. The same themes, the same thoughts, the same circumstances, would have been wholly different, and inferior in interest, had there been a different atmosphere, unirradiated by the colouring of a profound spiritual experience. Moral and economical truth itself became religious, in passing through his mind, and the proverbs of this world's wisdom received a transfiguration from the presence of higher realities, connecting them with the spiritual world. The same subjects, in the same style, and by a genius not inferior to Cowper's, might have been presented; but, without the omnipresent charm of Cowper's piety, they would have been comparatively unattractive.

There is a tenderness and pensiveness arising from the very imperfection of that piety, that is, from its personal quality of despondency, which his poetry could not have possessed except for the peculiarity of his own experience. His subjective despair, like some of the stops in a great organ, has communicated an indefinable charm to the strains of his melody, without changing either the combination or individuality of the notes. His genius, under the influence of his piety, was like a piano with the *Æolian* attachment, rendering the whole an instrument of a vastly higher order. Men of the world were attracted, without knowing what it was that peculiarly attracted them. Even the philosopher Franklin, after long abjuration of poetry, was delighted with Cowper's first volume; and while he has given the reasons for his admiration, according to his philosophic judgment and excellent common sense, there was still the invisible, indefinable charm, which he knew not, or could not recognise, or name, but

without which we are sure he would not have been so deeply moved. It was the tone of the soul, renewed by Divine grace, and *so* renewed that whatever subject occupied it, whatever wind swept over the Harp of Immortality, the strains breathed forth would carry something of that celestial influence.

We suppose that if an angel, concealed amid a throng of revelers, were to sing "Auld Lang Syne," there would be such a tone of heaven in the melody, such a deep soul of spiritual character and power inspiring it, and breathing from it, that the merriment would cease, and the voice of the revelers be hushed in solemn silence. A spell mysterious and irresistible would steal upon the heart, and the sentiment of evil would be overawed by the presentiment of good, the present, though unknown and unacknowledged, soul of holiness. And we may suppose that if one of the melodies of heaven could be sung by a lost spirit of the world of woe, concealed in human shape among the choir of a Christian assembly, there would be that irresistible character and soul of despair prevailing over the joy of the song, that the whole multitude of listeners might be melted into tears, or awed into a mysterious dread, unconscious of the cause, instead of yielding to the joy of an anthem of glory. The power of perfect and domineering character is itself absorbing and supreme, and combined with genius, or when genius creates its expression, there is the charm of a personal presence in everything that the author writes.

CHAPTER XI.

Hope suspended, but pride subdued—The child of God walking in darkness—Nature of the light of life—Cowper's encouragement and advice to others.

It may be named as another effect of Cowper's despondency, and of the peculiarity of God's discipline with him, that in weaning him from the world, and making its vanities indifferent to him, it likewise so effectually broke his pride, and purified his moral and mental vision from the spirit of self-seeking ; so that while hope as to another world was almost suspended, the common motives as to this world were suspended or inactive also, in a great degree ; so that truth comes to us in his poetry with a sincerity and artlessness, an unambitious simplicity, purity, and beauty, which is as the very reflection of the firmament of heaven thrown on us without spot or wrinkle from the mirror of his mind. The rays of truth and of celestial wisdom were not, in his case, refracted by the ordinary medium of ambition, the thirst for human applause ; but came straight through his heart, baptised only or mainly with the heavenly affections and the pervading melancholy tenderness that reigned there.

For the heavenly affections were prevalent and living,

were quick and active, rarely reached by the blight, whatever it was, that blasted the blossoms of a personal hope. In this respect his religion was the most unselfish that can well be conceived of. There was an inner sanctuary, a holy of holies, in which it lived and reigned as God's fire, for God's love and approbation, though a personal hope that he himself was interested in God's mercy seldom was indulged or expressed during long intervals of the prevalence of his disease ; and there was a pall of gloom let down before his spiritual vision that no effort could penetrate. Yet through all this darkness and paralysis of the hopeful part of his being, the sensitive and emotive part remained warm, affectionate, and breathing with heavenly life. The reef on which his hope had struck remained ; and the tide of Divine grace, though it flooded every other part of his nature, never rose high enough to set that hope at liberty.

There were long intervals in which he could not even pray ; and still, with this petrification of his religious existence in that direction, as if indeed the finger of doom had been already laid upon it, there were all the lineaments of a child of God, all the gentleness, humility, meekness, patience, tenderness of conscience, and gracious heavenly sensibility, that must have been traced, had the spell of his disease been broken, to an uninterrupted communion of the soul with God. It is a most surprising, if not quite solitary instance. It was a miracle of grace almost as wonderful as if the sun in the physical world should be blotted from the heavens, and yet the earth kept rolling on her axis, and producing her accustomed fruits in their seasons. The genealogical chain of Christian graces and

enjoyments so strikingly set forth by Paul in the fifth of Romans seemed, in Cowper's case, sundered in the middle, and Hope was dropped out ; there was tribulation, patience, experience, but not hope ; and though there was undoubted proof of the love of God shed abroad in the heart, yet the sense of this blessing, the witness of the Spirit, and the earnest of the inheritance, seemed wholly wanting. And yet there was the most humble submissiveness to God's will, under this distressing, and sometimes tremendous dispensation.

We have, perhaps, seen such instances ourselves, in men who were never poets, though sincere Christians, and, notwithstanding their gloom and darkness, eminent Christians. We have seen a child of God under an impression, for years, of almost the profoundest despair, yet so kind, so sympathising, so conscientious, so benevolent, that others could not doubt, though he himself could never believe, that God was with him as his everlasting Saviour and friend. Such are extreme instances of what that admirable old Puritan writer, Thomas Goodwin, considered with so much carefulness and tenderness in a work given to the subject, which he called "The Child of God walking in Darkness." Such cases are certainly provided for in the Word of God, and may be considered as predicted in some measure in that very striking passage in Isaiah, "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of His servant, that walketh in darkness and hath no light ? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." And how sympathising, gracious, and provident is God in regard to all the distresses of His people, all possible forms of their spiritual as well as temporal evils, in that

He has not only given examples in His Word of just such cases, but has mercifully laid down rules both for the encouragement and direction of His afflicted ones, that they may not despair, nor ever conclude, as men are apt to do in such trials, that there never was or could be any such case before.

Our theological philosophers, who assert that for a child of God truly fearing the Lord, and desiring in all things to please Him, there never can be such a thing as spiritual darkness, are the worst of all comforters. The asserted rule of such uninterrupted light and enjoyment is almost as bad as the law of the Ten Commandments for life and salvation; it strikes you dead; and if all is sin in the Christian life that is *not* light and enjoyment, some of the humblest, most contrite, most devoutly breathing and holy walking souls that ever lived, have lived long intervals in sin, even when panting after God as the hart panteth after the water-brook. Most true it is, and for ever blessed be the Lord's name for the assurance, that he that followeth Him shall not walk in darkness, but shall have THE LIGHT OF LIFE. But equally true it is that the light of life may be within the soul, and also upon its path, and yet the eye of the soul may be so holden as not to see and know a present Saviour, nor have the assurance of an interest in Him. For a long, long time, this was the case in Cowper's experience.

Yet, even in the midst of his own darkness, he could encourage others, and reason with delightful Christian wisdom, tenderness, and truth on cases somewhat similar to his own. In a letter to Newton concerning the doubts of his beloved wife as to her own interest in heavenly

things, Cowper says, "None intimately acquainted with her as we have been could doubt it. She doubted it, indeed, herself; but though it is not our duty to doubt, any more than it is our privilege, I have always considered the self-condemning spirit, to which such doubts are principally owing, as one of the most favourable symptoms of a nature spiritually renewed."

Cowper would often address letters of sympathy and consolation to afflicted friends, as, for example, to Dr Bagot, Mr Hurdia, Hayley, and others; and as he never wrote what he did not feel, and never out of mere compliment either to the dead or the living, we cannot but find in his references to the time of an anticipated happy meeting in a better world, a proof that amid all his personal despair he was still the "prisoner of hope" himself, and kept in the bottom of his heart something of the encouragement he gave to others. To Dr Bagot, in sympathy for a fresh and common sorrow, he says—"Both you and I have this comfort when deprived of those we love—at our time of life we have every reason to believe that the deprivation cannot be long. Our sun is setting too, and when the hour of rest arrives, we shall rejoin your brother, and many whom we have tenderly loved, our forerunners into a better country." Cowper wrote this in a season of gloom in 1793.

Of another instance of spiritual distress, in which Cowper took a deep concern, he thus writes to Mr Newton—"I have no doubt that it is distemper. But distresses of mind that are occasioned by distemper are the most difficult of all to deal with. They refuse all consolation, they will hear no reason. God only, by His own immediate impressions,

can remove them; *as after an experience of thirteen years' misery I can abundantly testify.*" This was written in the year 1787, and yet, in the midst of that misery he could look back, past those thirteen years, to a period of light and happiness, so radiant, so sweet, so serene, so heavenly, and so long-continued, that he would sometimes say, in reference to God's mercy in those comforts, and the certainty and celestial reality of them, that he could not be so duped, even by the arch-enemy himself, as to be made to question the divine nature of them. And with what affecting tenderness, when he left Olney, that scene of so much bliss and so much wretchedness, does he record his feelings! "I recollected that I had once been happy there, and could not, without tears in mine eyes, bid adieu to a place in which God had so often found me. The human mind is a great mystery; mine, at least, appeared to me to be such upon this occasion. I found that I had not only had a tenderness for that ruinous abode, because it had once known me happy in the presence of God; but that even the distress I had suffered for so long a time on account of His absence, had endeared it to me as much." Surely this is a most striking proof of the depth of Cowper's piety as well as the darkness and severity of his gloom.

CHAPTER XII.

The sickness, conversion, and death of Cowper's brother—Cowper's surprise and joy at such a manifestation of grace.

LET us now return to the record of his life when it was passing so sweetly in a retirement filled with sacred duties and enjoyments. The first event that interrupted its quiet and happy course, was the death of his dear brother at Cambridge, in 1770. But that sickness and departure were attended by a manifestation of God's grace so remarkable, so clear, so triumphant, that the affliction was quite disarmed of its sting, and passed in the experience of Cowper rather as a bright angel of mercy than a cloud of trial and distress. From the first moment of Cowper's own conversion, he had not ceased to interest himself with affectionate earnestness in behalf of the soul of his brother, whose views then were anything but evangelical, and who, though a man of strict morality, high intellectual accomplishments, refined taste, a most amiable temper, and a minister of the Church of England, was yet one among the many who counted the doctrine of regeneration by the Holy Spirit as a fanatical delusion. When Newton afterward published Cowper's deeply interesting and most instructive narrative of the conversion and death of his beloved brother, it was prefaced with some notice of that

prevalent scepticism, under the power and fashion of which, an avowed attachment to the doctrines of the Gospel was regarded as a fit subject for ridicule. "The very name of vital, experimental religion," said Newton, "excites contempt and scorn, and provokes resentment. The doctrines of regeneration by the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit, and the necessity of His continual agency and influence to advance the holiness and comfort of those in whose hearts he has already begun a work of grace, are not only exploded and contradicted by many who profess a regard for the Bible, and by some who have subscribed to the articles and liturgy of our Established Church, but they who avow an attachment to them are, upon that account, and that account only, considered as hypocrites or visionaries, knaves or fools."

Cowper's memoir of his brother was the record of an instance of Divine grace inferior, if it all, only to the wondrous interposition of mercy in his own case. For several years Cowper's conversations with his brother seemed to have little effect, and his narrative of his own cure by the grace of Christ, which he gave him to peruse, seemed to be regarded by him rather as a proof and result of his madness. But when his illness came, Cowper frequently conversed and prayed with him, and at length he had the unspeakable happiness to find, that though so long blinded by prejudice, yet now he began to see, and speedily indeed became like a little child, and in the reception and belief of those same truths which he had before rejected, he was so filled with happiness and peace, that Cowper's own surprise and joy were almost greater than he could bear. On the borders of the river of death they

had communion on the themes of heaven, delightful, satisfactory, ecstatic ; and the dear object of Cowper's love, anxiety, and faith passed serenely and happily away in humble faith and prayer.

Before he died, he told Cowper that he thought his own redemption from the power of sin and deliverance from blindness was still more wonderful than his ; for his prejudices were fast confirmed and riveted against the truth, and he had all his life been a companion with those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised the doctrines of the Cross. Such was his clergyman in his early days ; such were his schoolmaster and instructors ; such the most admired characters of the university ; and such was he, in the parish over which he was the minister. He told Cowper that he was just beginning to be a deist, and had long desired to be so ; and he owned, what he never confessed before, that his office, and the duties of it, were a wearisomeness to him which he could not bear. "Yet," said he, "wretched creature and beast that I was, I was esteemed religious, though I lived without God in the world."

"Brother, if I live," said he to Cowper, "you and I shall be more like one another than we have been. But whether I live or live not, all is well, and shall be so ; I know it will ; I have felt that which I never felt before ; and am sure that God has visited me with this sickness to teach me what I was too proud to learn in health. I never had satisfaction till now. The doctrines I had been used to, referred me to myself for the foundation of my hopes, and there I could find nothing to rest upon. The sheet-anchor of the soul was wanting. I thought

you wrong, yet wished to believe as you did. You suffered more than I have done before you believed these truths ; but our sufferings, though different in their kind and measure, were directed to the same end. I hope God has taught me that which He teaches none but His own. I hope so. These things were foolishness to me once, but now I have a firm foundation, and am satisfied."

Cowper's memoir of the wondrous change in his brother, and of the great mercy of God in his sickness and death, is so simple, so impressive and beautiful, that we wonder that it has never been more widely circulated in a form by itself. It presents a most attractive and encouraging picture of the grace of the Redeemer. One evening, when Cowper went to bid him good-night, he resumed the account of his feelings in the following words :—" As empty, and yet full ; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things, I see the rock upon which I once split, and I see the rock of my salvation. . . . I have learned *that* in a moment which I could not have learned by reading many books for many years. I have often studied these points, and studied them with great attention, but was blinded by prejudice ; and unless He who alone is worthy to unloose the seals had opened the book to me, I had been blinded still. Now they appear so plain, that though I am convinced no comment could have ever made me understand them, I wonder I did not see them before."

Another evening he said :—" I see now who was right and who was mistaken. . . . What a scene is passing before me ! Ideas upon these subjects crowd upon me faster than I can give them utterance. How plain do many texts appear, to which, after consulting all the

commentators, I could hardly affix a meaning ; and now I have their true meaning without any comment at all. There is but one key to the New Testament, but one Interpreter. I cannot describe to you, nor shall ever be able to describe, what I felt in the moment when it was given to me. May I make a good use of it ! How I shudder when I think of the danger I have just escaped ! I had made up my mind upon these subjects, and was determined to hazard all upon the justness of my own opinions."

He had once read the memoirs of Janeway at Cowper's desire, and he now told Cowper that he had laughed at it in his own mind, and accounted it mere madness and folly. Cowper's own narrative of himself he had also ascribed to the unsettled condition of his intellect, but now he considered his own redemption from such ignorance, darkness, and guilt to be more wonderful than even Cowper's. One afternoon, while Cowper was writing by the fireside, he thus addressed himself to the nurse, who sat at the head of the bed :—" Nurse, I have lived three and thirty years, and I will tell you how I have spent them. When I was a boy, they taught me Latin ; and because I was the son of a gentleman, they taught me Greek. These I learned under a sort of private tutor. At the age of fourteen, or thereabouts, they sent me to a public school, where I learned more Latin and Greek, and last of all to this place, where I have been learning more Latin and Greek still. Now, has not this been a blessed life, and much to the glory of God ?" He was much distressed at the thought of having been for ten years an ordained minister, but a blind leader of the blind ; intrusted with the care of souls, yet unable to teach

them, because he knew not the Lord himself. He desired and hoped to recover, that he might yet be faithful, and be an instrument of good to others. He said to his brother, "Brother, I was going to say I was born in such a year; but I correct myself—I would rather say, in such a year I came into the world. You know when I was born."

The loss of a brother so inexpressibly dear, at the very moment when he had begun to live, and could fully sympathise with Cowper in all his Christian feelings, would have been an overwhelming sorrow, but for the greatness of the grace attending it. The deep extraordinary experience of Divine mercy in so peaceful and happy a death, confirmed Cowper in his own faith and hope, and prevented the disastrous effect which so great an affliction might otherwise have had upon his mental frame and nervous system. He continued the performance and enjoyment of his spiritual duties, and went on in the composition of the "Olney Hymns." His letters had long breathed a sweet spirit of piety and of affectionate solicitude for others, that they might enjoy the same heavenly hope with himself. And yet at this very time the period was near when the dreadful malady which had carried him to the insane asylum at St Albans, would again seize upon his being, and mind and heart would be involved for a season in the blackness of darkness.

And here we note that if it had not been for the rich and sweet experience of God's loving-kindness in these years of light and peace that, in Huntingdon and Olney, in the Christian society of the Unwins and of Newton, had passed so pleasantly, the dread incursion of his madness would utterly have overwhelmed him, and he must have

passed into absolute incurable despair. But during those years of such heavenly Christian enjoyment and frequently unclouded light, God was preparing him for a long and dreary conflict, and at the same time providing for the exercise and development of his genius. In those years, more than in all the rest of his life, he gained that rich spiritual wisdom, that experimental knowledge of divine truth, that acquaintance with the human heart, as touched by divine grace, that affectionate sympathy with and knowledge of the woes of other hearts, and that habit of submissive acquiescence with the will of God, which prepared him to write such a poem as "The Task."

Yet Southey dares to intimate—concerning the Christian experience of Cowper in these delightful years, and especially the happiness of his first recovery—that it was merely the illusion of his madness, which ought to have been discouraged. He sets it down (as we have seen) as a perilous religious enthusiasm, and rebukes the religious friends of Cowper for confirming him in the belief that there was any thing supernatural in his cure. But certainly it would have been strange comfort, and as dangerous as strange, to tell the victim of religious despair, in the first happiness of a sight of the Redeemer, and the first enjoyment of a serene hope, that the happiness and the hope were both illusive, and that the raptures of a recovery, if deemed real, would only be productive of the perilous consequences of religious enthusiasm. In this and some other passages, Southey goes far toward the hazardous intimation that Cowper's religious experience, instead of being the work of the Spirit of God, was only

another form of his insanity, or the confounding of bodily sensations with spiritual impressions.

Now, if Southey could study such a manifestation of grace and truth in Christ Jesus as that revealed and recorded in the lives of such men as Newton and Cowper, and, we may add, the German convert Van Lier (whose account of his own Christian experience Cowper translated from the Latin), and yet deliberately sneer at such experience, calling it the "Torrid Zone," and maintaining a mind and heart all the way blinded to the interpositions of grace, divine and supernatural, it is one of the most extraordinary cases of unbelief and darkness ever known. If Southey's mind, while rational, was in that state of scepticism, *his* madness was infinitely worse than Cowper's. We know not what to make of the tone, half devout, half sneering, that marks a portion of the life of the Christian poet. But Southey had also called the experience of Bunyan himself, in one stage of it, a burning and feverish enthusiasm. He seems to have prided himself in the assumption of a much better understanding of Cowper's malady, than Newton and Mrs Unwin, Cowper's dearest friends and guardians, possessed; but of its cure, as divine and supernatural, he seems to have believed or understood little or nothing. He appears like a Rationalistic theologian, or Neologian, writing commentaries on an experimental process of grace, of which he does not credit the existence.

Yet, in the purest and serenest light, both of reason and of faith, Cowper himself was so fully persuaded that his recovery at St Albans, and his happiness afterward,

had come from God and his grace; he *knew* this, with such perfect assurance, by the Spirit of God bearing witness with his own spirit, that even in a subsequent access of his malady, and under the depths of what seemed the darkness of absolute despair, he declared that it was not in the power of the arch-enemy himself to deprive him of that conviction. At a late period of his life, Cowper made, in one of his letters, a striking remark, which he little knew was to become applicable (with what force and beauty!) to some of his own biographers. "The quarrel that the world has," said he, "with evangelic men and doctrines, they would have with a host of angels in the human form. For it is the quarrel of owls with sunshine; of ignorance with divine illumination."

CHAPTER XIII.

Recurrence of Cowper's malady—Its continuance for seven years—His gradual return to literary effort, and his enjoyment in the composition of his poetry.

THE threatened access of his malady came with great suddenness in the month of January 1773. A dim mysterious presentiment of it took possession of his soul in one of his solitary field-walks in the country, and he returned home and composed the last of the hymns contributed by him to the Olney Collection, and one of the most exquisitely beautiful and instructive among them all, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." That holy and admirable composition was the only effort of his genius for nearly seven years, during which period, or the greater part of it, he was in the profoundest dejection of spirits, and sometimes in a state amounting to paroxysms of despair. Some years afterward, in a letter to Lady Hesketh, he described his condition under that attack, as follows:—

"In the year 1773, the same scene that was acted at St Albans opened upon me again at Olney, only covered with a still deeper shade of melancholy, and ordained to be of much longer duration. I was suddenly reduced from my wonted state of understanding to an almost childish im-

becility. I did not, indeed, lose my senses, but I lost the power to exercise them. I could return a rational answer, even to a difficult question ; but a question was necessary, or I never spoke at all. This state of mind was accompanied, as I suppose it to be in most instances of the kind, with misapprehensions of things and persons that made me a very untractable patient. I believed that every body hated me, and that Mrs Unwin hated me worst of all ; was convinced that all my food was poisoned, together with ten thousand meagrimms of the same stamp. Dr Cotton was consulted. He replied that he could do no more for me than might be done at Olney, but recommended particular vigilance lest I should attempt my life, a caution for which there was the greatest occasion. At the same time that I was convinced of Mrs Unwin's aversion to me, I could endure no other companion. The whole management of me consequently devolved upon her, and a terrible task she had. She performed it, however, with a cheerfulness hardly ever equalled on such an occasion, and I have often heard her say that if she ever praised God in her life, it was when she found that she was to have all the labour."

This second attack of his malady, though sudden and severe, was lighter than the first ; but it continued much longer, and only by slow degrees did his mind regain its wonted strength and playfulness. It is not till near 1780 that his letters become frequent and full, and from that time ever after, though often exquisitely sportive and humorous, there was a tone of pensiveness, and often of the deepest melancholy in them ; nor did he ever again in life enjoy, at any interval, the serene unclouded blissful-

ness of his first religious experience, but his path was always more or less in the valley of the shadow of death. When he began to recover, it was by gradual amusement and occupation, such as playing with his tame hares, gardening, building houses for his plants, and drawing, in which things he engaged as with the affectionate and playful spirit of a child ; it was thus only that his mind resumed its active habits, and at length could come to the effort of literary composition. He wrote verses now and then for amusement, but compared his mind, in one of his letters to Mr Newton, to a board under the plane of the carpenter, the shavings being his uppermost thoughts, not likely to be ever anything *but* shavings, though planed as thin as a wafer. "I cannot bear much thinking," said he. "The meshes of that fine net-work, the brain, are composed of such mere spinner's threads in me, that when a long thought finds its way into them, it buzzes, and twangs, and hustles about at such a rate, as seems to threaten the whole contexture."

During this picture of gloom and gradual convalescence, Mr Newton, Mrs Unwin, and his playful tame hares, were for years his only companions. In 1780, when his mind had fully recovered its strength, and the dejection of his spirits was in some degree lightened, Mr Newton was called from Olney to a parish in London ; and thenceforward their intercourse was continued in an affectionate and deeply, often intensely and painfully, interesting correspondence ; for to Newton Cowper opened his heart more freely and fully, in regard to his spiritual distress and gloom, than to any other human being. Nevertheless, some of the most exquisitely playful and humorous let-

ters he ever wrote were written to Newton, though ordinarily, with him, the wonted themes of conversation would very naturally be of a graver caste than with many of his other correspondents. In one of his earliest letters to Newton, he makes the following most impressive remark in regard to his own experience, as teaching him the vanity of earthly pursuits and pleasures : " If every human being upon earth could think for one quarter of an hour as I have done for many years, there might, perhaps, be many miserable men among them, but not an unawakened one would be found from the arctic to the antarctic circle." This is exceedingly striking. It is like opening a door in the side of a dark mountain, where secret and awful procedures of nature are going on, and bidding you look in.

He continues, describing the chastened Christian spirit in which his sorrows had taught him to pursue the harmless occupations and amusements with which he was beguiling his mind into employment, " I could spend whole days and moonlight nights in feeding upon a lovely prospect. My eyes drink the rivers as they flow. I delight in baubles, and know them to be such ; for, viewed without a reference to their Author, what is the earth, what are the planets, what is the sun itself, but a bauble ? Better for a man never to have seen them, or to see them with the eyes of a brute, stupid and unconscious of what he beholds, than not to be able to say, ' The Maker of all these wonders is my friend.' The eyes of many have never been opened to see that they are trifles ; mine have been, and will be till they are closed for ever. They think a fine estate, a large conservatory hot-house, rich as a West Indian garden, things of consequence, visit them

with pleasure, and muse upon them with ten times more. I am pleased with a frame of four lights, doubtful whether the few pines it contains will ever be worth a farthing; amuse myself with a green-house, which Lord Bute's gardener could take upon his back, and walk away with it; and when I have paid it the accustomed visit, and watered it, and given it air, I say to myself—This is not mine; 'tis a plaything, lent me for the present; I must leave it soon."

In another letter, to Mr Unwin, at the same time, Cowper speaks of the delight with which just then he was absorbed in the passion for landscape-drawings; and he describes a characteristic of his mind and heart, intimately connected, no doubt, with his success as a poet. "So long as I am pleased with an employment," says he, "I am capable of unwearied application, because my feelings are all of the intense kind; I never received a *little* pleasure from anything in my life; if I am delighted, it is in the extreme." Keeping this characteristic in view, it is impossible not to reflect, with great satisfaction, on the pleasure Cowper must have enjoyed, even in the midst of saddest dejection, almost descending to despair, in the composition of some of his poetry. We are reminded of the experience of Bunyan, which in many points had so much that was similar to Cowper's. For some years Bunyan was under such a load of the sense of guilt and condemnation, that he describes himself almost as one coming from hell into the pulpit; he says he went in chains to preach to men in chains; but it was marvellous that almost always, while this experience lasted, the burden was taken off the moment he began to speak, and he could preach with a

divine freedom and enjoyment, though, as soon as he got through, it all came back again, even at the pulpit stairs.

Something such was Cowper's experience in the composition of his poems. The exercise of composition, while he was engaged in it, carried him above the gloom and dejection of his soul, into clear skies. It was like climbing up a mountain out of a sea of mist, into a serene and cloudless atmosphere, to describe and enjoy the glory, and then return again. Cowper often declared that the same dejection of soul which would have kept another man from ever becoming a poet, made him one. Moreover, it is clear that during these apparently useless and hopeless years, in which by turns he was playing the gardener, carpenter, hare-tamer, and twenty other things, in almost childlike amusement, he was gathering materials from nature, as well as unconscious quiet meditation, for his future works.

Meantime, his letters were often little poems, sometimes inimitably and exquisitely droll; and in the very midst of them, as often as a thought seized him for the purpose, or a subject fit for rhyme, he would throw it at once into verse, and thus produced some of the most beautiful of his minor pieces. "I am glad," said he, in reference to such efforts, "when I can find a subject to work upon;—a lapidary, I suppose, accounts it a laborious part of his business to rub away the roughness of the stone; but it is my amusement; and if, after all the polishing I can give it, it discovers some little lustre, I think myself well rewarded for my pains." These were what he called the shavings of his mind; and sometimes, when the humour took him, he would in the midst of a letter open his

pocket-book, and find something to transcribe that had been sketched down, but not finished, at a previous period. "The Nightingale and Glow-worm," "The Goldfinch," "The Raven," "The Pine-apple and the Bee," "The Case between Eyes and Nose," "The Doves," and a great many other pieces, were composed in this playful, delightful spontaneous way; and after ministering to his own amusement, were sent off for the gratification of others.

Sometimes he would sit down and scribble a letter to Newton in the form of prose, but in the reality of rhyme, apparently without the least effort, and from the mere spontaneous overflow of a playful mind in the habit of versification. Southey has somewhere most unwarrantably intimated that Cowper, in his correspondence with Newton, pursued it as a task, and like a man going to the confessional. The assertion is quite unfounded, for some of the most sportive in the whole collection of his epistles are those addressed to this dear friend and to Mrs Newton. And although his friendship with Mr Unwin was formed some years the earliest, yet neither Mr Unwin, nor any other friend on earth, ever knew so much of Cowper's spiritual conflicts and distresses as Newton, nor did ever any other being sympathise so deeply and intelligently with him, in the endurance of such tremendous gloom. And Newton's letters to Cowper must have been full of affectionate encouragement, instruction, and support, and because mainly occupied with the subject of religion, therefore the more acceptable, although Southey complains that Newton sermonised in his epistles, and that therefore "they were not such as Cowper could have had any pleasure in receiving. If the sermonising was such as is contained

in the "Cardiphonia," Cowper would have delighted in it, and beyond question was greatly benefited and comforted. But none of the letters which Cowper ever received from any of his correspondents could be compared with his own for the perfection of all the graces that combine to render them instructive and charming. No man that ever wrote English could write letters so beautifully as Cowper.

One of his biographers has said, though along with much praise of the superior excellence of Cowper's letters above all others, that they are not distinguished for superiority of thought or diction ;—a most unfortunate criticism, since they are distinguished for these very qualities, above all other epistolary collections in the language. The diction with its ornaments is as pure and sweet, as artless and simple, as natural and idiomatic as a field of fresh grass intermingled with strawberry blossoms or set with daisies, the most unassuming, and yet the loveliest of flowers for such a combination. And the thought is often so profound, that if it were not for the charming simplicity and artlessness of the style and language, the mind would be arrested in admiration of its originality and power. The reader is absolutely deceived by that simplicity into the impression that such thought is as easy as the language ; and, indeed, such a style *both* of thought and language marks the highest genius, and while it seems easy, is proved difficult by its very rareness in English literature. The study of Cowper's prose, as well as his poetry, would be one of the best disciplinary processes for the acquisition of a habit of ease and purity, and at the same time strength and point, in the use of the English tongue.

CHAPTER XIV.

Composition of "The Progress of Error," "Table Talk," "Retirement," and other pieces—Publication of his first volume—Secret of its attractiveness of thought and style—Beauty of Cowper's letters.

It was thus that by degrees, step after step, Cowper was led to the composition of the poem entitled "The Progress of Error," which he announced in a letter to Newton, with the following remarks, in the month of December :—
"At this season of the year, and in this gloomy uncomfortable climate, it is no easy matter for the owner of a mind like mine to divert it from sad subjects, and fix it upon such as may administer to its amusement. Poetry, above all things, is useful to me in this respect. While I am held in pursuit of pretty images, or a pretty way of expressing them, I forget everything that is irksome, and, like a boy that plays truant, determine to avail myself of the present opportunity to be amused, and to put by the disagreeable recollection that I must, after all, go home and be whipped again."

In this way it was that he finished his "Table Talk," which in 1781 he sent to Mr Newton, with a characteristic letter, in which he described his difficult dilemma between weeping and laughing, and said he was merry to decoy

people into his company, and grave that they might be the better for it. But he was inclined to suspect that if his Muse were to go forth clad in Quaker colour, without a bit of ribbon to enliven her appearance, she might walk from one end of London to the other, as little noticed as if she were one of the sisterhood indeed. A few days afterward, he announced to Newton the poem of "Expostulation;" and a week or two after that, asked his advice and help by way of a preface, in the publication of a volume. When he first made the collection of pieces of which it was composed, he had not the smallest expectation of publishing.

He told his friend Hill that the volume was principally produced in the winter, when he could not be employed out of doors. "When I can find no other occupation," said he, "I think; and when I think, I am very apt to do it in rhyme. Hence it comes to pass that the season of the year which generally pinches off the flowers of poetry, unfolds mine, such as they are, and crowns me with a winter garland. In this respect, therefore, I and my contemporary bards are by no means upon a par. They write when the delightful influences of fine weather, fine prospects, and a brisk motion of the animal spirits make poetry almost the language of nature; and I, when icicles depend from all the leaves of the Parnassian laurel, and when a reasonable man would as little expect to succeed in verse as to hear a blackbird whistle."

The volume, thus prepared, was published in 1782, when Cowper was fifty years of age. It was the first-fruits of his sorrows, his piety, his genius, of which his compositions among the "Olney Hymns," not then given to the

public, had been the earnest and the promise. It consisted of eight separate poems, the first of which was "Table Talk," and the last "Retirement;" all of a character so harmonious, and in the same metre, melody, and style, that the collection possessed a unity almost as perfect as "The Task." This admirable volume was the opening of a new and original vein in English poetical literature; but with all its excellences, though it found many admirers, was by no means immediately popular. The volume grew by delay of publication, no small portion of it having been composed and added while the first part was in the press. This was the case with the poems of "Hope," "Conversation," and the whole of the last piece, entitled "Retirement." The whole of the volume was "finished, polished, touched, and retouched, with the utmost care." This is Cowper's own declaration respecting it. He occupied more time and spent more labour on the revisal of his compositions than on the first creation of them.

The volume was to have been published with a preface by Newton, which had been prepared at Cowper's request, and was sent to Johnson, Cowper's publisher. It always appears now, printed with the poems, as published February 18, 1782, and signed John Newton. Yet, so low was the state of religion in England at that time—so fashionable was it, even in the English Church, to hate, revile, and despise experimental piety as Methodism, and so fearful was the publisher of injuring the sale of the volume, that, in compliance with his wishes, the affectionate, judicious, and admirable preface by Cowper's dear and valued friend was suppressed, and the volume was published without it.

Cowper left the whole thing to be settled between Johnson and Newton; but it would have been a wiser and more dignified course if he had insisted on the preface appearing with the book. It was thought too pious, and he suffered Johnson, the publisher, to have his own way, though he wrote Newton that the times must have altered for the worse, and the world must have grown even more foolish and careless than it was when he had the honour of knowing it, if such a preface as his friend's could spoil the market of the volume. It was in this preface that Newton spoke of Cowper as the friend whose presence at Olney was "one of the principal blessings of his life; a friend and counsellor in whose company for almost seven years, though they were seldom seven successive waking hours separated, he always found new pleasure."

On the occasion of composing this volume, Cowper told his friend Mr Unwin, that there were times when he was no more a poet than a mathematician, and when such a season occurred, he always thought it better to give up the point than to labour in vain. Sometimes he could write fifty lines a day, sometimes not five. After he had discontinued the practice of verse-making for some weeks, he felt quite incapable of resuming it, and wondered at it, as one of the most extraordinary incidents of his life, that he should have composed a volume. In better days, or what might have seemed better, he would not have dared to commit his name and reputation to the hazard of public opinion. But the discipline through which God had caused him to pass, made what once he regarded as important to appear trivial, and he found he could go forward

in his work unfettered by fear, and under no restraint from his natural diffidence.

He told Mr Unwin that what he reckoned among his principal advantages as a writer of verse was this, that up to that time, in 1781, he had not read a single English poem for thirteen years, and but one for twenty. But this was not the cause of his originality, which is quite another quality than the bare absence of imitation; and he was in some respects the most truly original poet that had appeared for a century. When his first volume was about to be published, he was not a little fearful of the opinion of Dr Johnson, and he told Newton that one of Johnson's pointed sarcasms, if he should happen to be displeased, would soon find its way into all companies, and spoil the sale. This is an interesting illustration of the despotic power over literary opinion so long wielded by Johnson, and carried much wider by his great conversational powers than by his written criticisms.

The secret of Cowper's attractiveness of thought and style, whatever he handled, and of the sweet air of nature breathing in every page, but especially in his rural descriptions, is disclosed in his letters. Whatever he did, he did with his whole heart. When he told his beloved cousin, Lady Hesketh, that he never received a *little* pleasure from any thing, he might have added, that things which to others might have seemed little, and would have occasioned no *thought* at all, were to him the ministers sometimes of profound and pensive thought, sometimes of exquisite pleasure. The charm of unaffected religious sentiment and feeling, diffused as an atmosphere belonging to the scenery, and the scenery to it, as idiomatic and

native as the air of an Italian sunset to the bay of Naples, was a new thing in poetry. Here was Biblical truth, Puritan truth, as plain and pungent as any of Latimer's sermons, and all the feeling of a poet's heart, and all the reality and fire of a poet's genius along with it; unpalatable and most condemning satire, and yet the earnestness, the humour, and the love that made it winning; and in all the pictures of rural life and landscape, the same elements, the sweet religious sensibility, the quick and interesting discernment, the quiet truth to nature, and a heart full of the enjoyment of it. Nothing was admitted from art or imitation, nothing added at second hand, nothing but what he himself drew from reality.

We find the poet in one of his letters persuading his friend Unwin to take more air and exercise in order to prevent dejection and melancholy, and telling him that easy-chairs and sedentary habits were no friends to cheerfulness. If his friend objected that his exercise would do him no good without an object, he answered, "Is not a new prospect, which in most countries is gained at the end of every mile, an object? Every thing I see in the fields is to me an object; and I can look at the same rivulet, or at a handsome tree, *every day of my life with new pleasure*. This, indeed, is partly the effect of a natural taste for rural beauty, and partly the effect of habit, for I never in all my life have let slip the opportunity of breathing fresh air, and conversing with nature, when I could fairly catch it. I earnestly recommend a cultivation of the same taste to you."

This delightful trait in the life and power of Cowper's character and genius reminds us forcibly of Coleridge's

remarks in the fifteenth essay in "The Friend," which he might himself have written immediately after the perusal of Cowper's letter. "To find no contradiction in the union of old and new, to contemplate the Ancient of Days with feelings as fresh as if they then sprang forth at his own fiat—this characterises the minds that feel the riddle of the world, and may help to unravel it. To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years has rendered familiar—

"With sun and moon and stars throughout the year,
And man and woman;"—

this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talent. And so to represent familiar objects as to awaken the minds of others to a like freshness of sensation concerning them—this is the prime merit of genius, and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation."

Cowper told his friend that he never knew, before he mounted his Parnassian steed, at what rate he might choose to travel. If he was indisposed to haste, it was impossible to accelerate his pace; if otherwise, equally impossible to stop him. This he said, even while composing "The Tirocinium;" and he added, "The critics will never know that four lines of it were composed while I had an ounce and a half of ipecacuanha upon my stomach, and a wooden vessel called a pail between my knees; and that in the very article—in short, that I was delivered of the emetic and the verses in the same moment." He thought that was a proof of singular industry, and though

it was not uncommon for poets to obtain great help from cathartics in the article of brilliancy, it was a new and original discovery to find that an emetic was a sovereign remedy for costiveness, and would be sure to produce a fluent and easy versification.

When Cowper's first volume was published, he sent it to his old school-fellows, Colman and Lord Chancellor Thurlow. They neither of them paid the slightest attention either to the poem or its author, not having the common civility even to acknowledge the gift. This neglect was more than made up to Cowper, in the letter of sincere and characteristic applause which he received from Dr Franklin; but for a season the rudeness of his old friends was the source of some justly indignant feelings in his bosom. From the Lord Chancellor the unkindness was the greater, because Cowper addressed to him, along with the volume, a letter referring to their early and cordial friendship, and entreating his lordship's pardon for the poem of which *he* was the subject. "The best excuse I can make," said Cowper, "is, that it flowed almost spontaneously from the affectionate remembrance of a connection that did me so much honour." Thurlow returned not the least acknowledgment or notice of this mark of continued regard on the part of a long intimate friend, and Cowper expressed his indignation in a poem sent to his dear friend Mr Unwin:—

"Farewell, false hearts! whose best affections fail,
Like shallow brooks, which summer suns exhale!"

"He has great abilities," said Cowper in a letter to Mr Unwin, "but no religion." And in a letter in regard to the volume of poetry, and the religious instruction it

was intended to convey: "I have sent him the truth, and the truth which I know he is ignorant of." When this letter was published by Hayley, this pointed declaration, which might possibly have awakened some salutary anxiety, was omitted for fear of giving offence, because Thurlow was still living! The description of character in the poem was also suppressed, but the following beautiful conclusion was printed, containing a picture, drawn from life, of Cowper's happiness in the treasures of friendship God had given him:—

"Votaries of business and of pleasure prove
Faithless alike in friendship and in love;
Retired from all the circles of the gay,
And all the crowds that bustle life away,
To scenes where competition, envy, strife,
Beget no thunder-clouds to trouble life.
Let me the charge of some good angel find,
One who has known and has escaped mankind,
Polite, yet virtuous, who has brought away
The manners, not the morals, of the day.
With him, perhaps with *her* (for men have known
No firmer friendships than the fair have shewn),
Let me enjoy, in some unthought of spot,
All former friends forgiven and forgot,
Down to the close of life's fast fading scene,
Union of hearts, without a flaw between.
'Tis grace, 'tis bounty, and it calls for praise,
If God give health, that sunshine of our days;
And if He add—a blessing shared by few—
Content of heart, more praises still are due.
But if He grant a friend, that boon possess'd
Indeed is treasure, and crowns all the rest.
And giving one whose heart is in the skies,
Born from above, and made divinely wise,
He gives what bankrupt Nature never can,
Whose noblest coin is light and brittle man,
Gold, purer far than Ophir ever knew,
A soul, an image of Himself, and therefore true.'

CHAPTER XV.

Power of Cowper's satire—Its Christian character and purpose—Power and beauty of thought in the poem of "Truth"—Sublimity of "The Expostulation"—Cowper's abhorrence of slavery.

FOR every one of the subjects in this volume, Cowper had been richly prepared, both by his spiritual discipline, and his education in the schools and in society. The power of vigorous and caustic satire was never more admirably combined with affectionate feeling, an enlarged and comprehensive sympathy, generous and kindly wit and humour, a fervent love of the truth, and hatred of all hypocrisy. With his native amiable disposition and unaffected Christian charity, it was impossible for Cowper to be bitter against anything but meanness, malignity, profane bigotry, and proud and fashionable sin. One would hardly have expected from this retired and shy observer, in that deep seclusion from which he looked forth through the loopholes of his retreat, upon the Babel of this world, so keen a discernment and so graphic and faithful a portraiture of its manners and its life, its follies and its woes. The keenness of Cowper's satire is not bitterness, not acrimony, but truth, and the just severity of Christian truth and love, against obstinate error, iniquity, pretension, and pride. Here is the burning and unsparing pungency of Juvenal,

along with a genial, gentle playfulness and Christian tenderness, of which the Roman satirist knew nothing. Cowper's satire is spontaneous, not artificial, not the ambition of severity, but as natural and playful as the humour in "John Gilpin," and, therefore, it is at once the most telling and effective, and at the same time the most interesting and attractive in the language. It is exceedingly seldom that satire so powerful is so penetrated with the spirit of good-nature and of love; and that a native faculty, so fitted and disposed for shrewd and biting notice and remark, is found so imbued with grace and gentleness.

But Cowper could pour out his whole soul in sacred invective and indignant rebuke of all forms of sacrilege and impiety, and could impress, in verse, all compact with thought and earnestness, the sanctifying and beloved themes of the gospel that inspired his heart. There was neither hesitation nor shrinking here, no disguise nor mitigation, no qualifying nor softening of the truth; but with the utmost plainness and point it was applied to the heart and conscience. With a dignity and power above all mere rhetoric, with a simplicity and terseness of speech that did not admit the possibility of being misunderstood, he presented in his poem on "Truth," the much-abused and derided doctrine of justification by faith in an atoning Saviour. With what unexpected power and pungency, and, at the same time, beauty, does that admirable poem open!—

"Man, on the dubious waves of error toss'd,
His ship half founder'd, and his compass lost,
Sees, far as human optics may command,
A sleeping fog, and fancies it dry land;
Spreads all his canvas, every sinew plies;
Pants for it, aims at it, enters it, and dies!

Then farewell all self-satisfying schemes,
 His well-built systems, philosophic dreams;
 Deceitful views of future bliss, farewell!
 He reads his sentence at the flames of hell.
 "Hard lot of man—to toil for the reward
 Of virtue, and yet lose it! Wherefore hard?
 He that would win the race must guide his horse
 Obedient to the customs of the course;
 Else, though unequal'd to the goal he flies,
 A meaner than himself shall gain the prize.
 Grace leads the right way: if you choose the wrong,
 Take it, and perish; but restrain your tongue;
 Charge not, with light sufficient, and left free,
 Your wilful suicide on God's decree."

With what convincing clearness of argument and beauty of illustration does he shew the worthlessness of all hope but that which, as an anchor to the soul, sure and steadfast, is cast within the vail. Every confidence of heaven is dismissed as imaginary and vain, whatever sect may rear, protect, and nourish it,

"If wild in nature, and not duly found,
 Gethsemane, in thy dear hallow'd ground!"

The passage beginning, "Who judged the Pharisee?" is a masterly comparison and inquisition of different forms of self-righteousness; and how beautiful the picture of the humble believing cottager, with her pillow, bobbins, and Bible, in contrast with the demigod of Parisian applause, jesting at Scripture, exalted on his pedestal of pride, and to the last lured by his vanity to believe a lie, till the fumes of frankincense from his flatterers mingled with the smoke that received him in the bottomless pit! Never were the fatal elements of a morality founded in selfishness and pride demonstrated in more direct and convincing analysis and light, than in this poem. And never

with more attractive and subduing truth was the contrast drawn between such motives and the gratitude and love of the penitent believing heart, resting only on Christ.

The poem entitled "Expostulation," is one of the highest and grandest exhibitions of Cowper's genius, unrivalled by any passages even in "The Task." From the first word in the opening line to the closing word in the last line, it is all fervid, glowing, and sublime, as if, like Dryden's Ode, it had been the composition of a single night, as if the subject had possessed him and carried him irresistibly away, instead of receiving the calm and careful application of his mind, day by day, and that, too, under the burden of nameless spiritual misery. It is a most extraordinary phenomenon, considering the known condition of the writer. It presents a career like Elijah's in the chariot of flame, yet the man is walking on earth, under clouds and darkness. With most impressive sublimity Cowper reviewed the history of Judea and of England, and, as if burning with the prophetic fire of an old inspired Hebrew, applied the lessons of rebuke and warning to his country's sins. With what beauty and power does he proclaim the certainty of retribution upon an unthankful, scornful land, asserting the only grounds of national security and prosperity, dependence upon God and obedience to His Word. The scathing lines applied to the formalism and hypocrisy of the Established Church, are as truthful and terrible now as ever.

"When nations are to perish in their sins,
'Tis in the Church the leprosy begins."

Solemn and pungent are the questions with which the poet bids his country stand and judge herself as having

incurred the anger of a holy God. And one of the most stunning interrogatories proclaims an iniquity imbedded in the very constitution of Church and State.

"Hast thou by statute shew'd from its design
The Saviour's feast, His own blest bread and wine,
And made the symbols of atoning grace
An office-key, a picklock to a place,
That infidels may prove their title good
By an oath dipp'd in sacramental blood?
A blot that will be still a blot, in spite
Of all that grave apologists may write,
And though a bishop toil to cleanse the stain,
He wipes and scours the silver cup in vain."

The tide of impassioned feeling, and scrutinising thought in this poem is so free, so flowing, so intense, that it seems as if the whole must have been poured forth at one effort, a burning torrent of emotion and of truth.

In these poems are to be found several of the most affecting notices, drawn evidently from his own experience of the misery of a guilty soul beneath the terrors of conviction, and its happiness and gratitude in the discovery of the glory of God's grace. In the poem on "Truth," there is a brief but most impressive reference to the insanity of suicide, in the rejection of the Scriptures, which it is impossible not to regard as his own judgment on his own case.

"Thus often unbelief, grown sick of life,
Flies to the tempting pool, or felon knife,
The jury meet, the coroner is short,
And lunacy the verdict of the court.
Reverse the sentence, let the truth be known,
Such lunacy is ignorance alone;
They know not (what some bishops may not know)
That Scripture is the only cure of woe.
That field of promise, how it flings abroad
Its odour o'er the Christian's thorny road!

The soul, reposing on assured relief,
 Feels herself happy amidst all her grief,
 Forgets her labour as she toils along,
 Weeps tears of joy, and bursts into a song.

All joy to the believer! He can speak,
 Trembling, yet happy, confident, yet meek.
 Since the dear hour that brought me to Thy foot,
 And cut up all my follies by the root,
 I never trusted in an arm but Thine,
 Nor hoped, but in Thy righteousness divine.
 My prayers and alms, imperfect and defiled,
 Were but the feeble efforts of a child.
 Howe'er perform'd, it was their brightest part
 That they proceeded from a grateful heart.
 Cleansed in Thine own all-purifying blood,
 Forgive their evil, and accept their good;
 I cast them at Thy feet;—my only plea
 Is what it was, dependence upon Thee;
 While struggling in the vale of tears below,
 That never fail'd, nor shall it fail me now.

Angelic gratulations rend the skies,
 Pride falls unpitied, never more to rise,
 Humility is crown'd, and Faith receives the prize."

Again, in the poem of "Hope," the author describes the triumphs of immortal Truth, as the Parent of Hope, and bids all mere fancy stand aloof from his design, so that the light and shade, and every stroke in the picture, while trembling he undertakes to trace so divine a work, may be taken from reality.

"For few believe the wonders Thou hast wrought,
 And none can teach them but whom Thou hast taught."

And indeed the picture here drawn is of a beauty and accuracy that can find no rival in the English language. The materials required to produce it are not at the command of the ordinary poet, however acute, profound, and vast his native genius, or all-entrancing and encompassing his imagination.

" If ever thou hast felt another's pain,
 If ever when he sigh'd hast sigh'd again,
 If ever on thine eyelid stood the tear
 That pity had engender'd, drop one here.
 This man was happy—had the world's good word,
 And with it every joy it could afford.
 Friendship and love seem'd tenderly at strife
 Which most should sweeten his untroubled life ;
 Politely learn'd, and of a gentle race,
 Good breeding and good sense gave all a grace.
 And whether at the toilet of the fair
 He laugh'd and trifled, made him welcome there,
 Or if in masculine debate he shared,
 Insured him mute attention and regard.
 Alas, how changed ! Expressive of his mind,
 His eyes are sunk, arms folded, head reclined,
 Those awful syllables, hell, death, and sin,
 Though whisper'd, plainly tell what works within ;
 That conscience there performs her proper part,
 And writes a doomsday sentence on his heart !
 Forsaking and forsaken of all friends,
 He now perceives where earthly pleasure ends.
 Hard task ! for one who lately knew no care,
 And harder still, as learn'd beneath despair !
 His hours no longer pass unmark'd away,
 A dark importance saddens every day.
 He hears the notice of the clock, perplex'd,
 And cries, Perhaps eternity strikes next !
 Sweet music is no longer music here,
 And laughter sounds like madness in his ear.
 His grief the world of all her power disarma,
 Wine has no taste, and beauty has no charms.
 God's holy Word, once trivial in his view,
 Now by the voice of his experience true,
 Seems, as it is, the fountain whence alone
 Must spring that hope he pants to make his own ;
 Now let the bright reverse be known abroad ;
 Say man's a worm, and power belongs to God.
 As when a felon, whom his country's laws
 Have justly doom'd for some atrocious cause,
 Expects in darkness and heart-chilling fears,
 The shameful close of all his misspent years ;
 If chance, on heavy pinions slowly borne.
 A tempest usher in the dreaded morn,

Upon his dangeon walls the lightnings play,
 The thunder seems to summon him away,
 The warder at the door his key applies,
 Shoots back the bolt, and all his courage dies.
 If then, just then, all thoughts of mercy lost,
 When Hope, long lingering, at last yields the ghost,
 The sound of pardon pierce his startled ear,
 He drops at once his fetters and his fear.
 A transport glows in all he looks and speaks,
 And the first thankful tears bedew his cheeks.
 Joy, far superior joy, that much outweighs
 The comfort of a few poor added days,
 Invades, possesses, and o'erwhelms the soul
 Of him whom Hope has with a touch made whole.
 'Tis heaven, all heaven, descending on the wings
 Of the glad legions of the King of kings;
 'Tis more—'tis God diffused through every part,
 'Tis God Himself triumphant in his heart.
 Oh welcome now the sun's once hated light!
 His noonday beams were never half so bright.
 Not kindred minds alone are call'd to employ
 Their hours, their days, in listening to his joy;
 Unconscious nature, all that he surveys,
 Rocks, groves, and streams must join him in his praise."

In these poems, in the piece on "Charity," we encounter the first expressive and energetic lines devoted by Cowper to the description of his abhorrence of slavery. The sentiments are those not of a man merely, but a Christian; not of our native love of liberty—a constituent element in every human mind—but also as taught by grace, and by the charity which is the fairest and foremost in the train of graces.

" Oh most degrading of all ills that wait
 On man, a mourner in his best estate!
 All other sorrows virtue may endure,
 And find submission more than half a cure.
 Grief is itself a medicine, and bestow'd
 To improve the fortitude that bears the load,
 To teach the wanderer, as his woes increase,
 The path of wisdom, all whose paths are peace.

But slavery !—Virtue dreads it as her grave :
 Patience itself is meanness in a slave :
 Or, if the will and sovereignty of God
 Bid suffer it awhile, and kiss the rod,
 Wait for the dawning of a brighter day,
 And snap the chain the moment when you may.
 Nature imprints upon whate'er we see
 That has a heart and life in it, Be free !
 The beasts are charter'd—neither age nor force
 Can quell the love of freedom in a horse,
 He breaks the curb that held him at the rack,
 And, conscious of an unincumber'd back,
 Snuffs up the morning air, forgets the rein ;
 Loose fly his forelock and his ample mane ;
 Responsive to the distant neigh, he neighs,
 Nor stops, till overleaping all delays
 He finds the pasture where his fellows graze.

“ Canst thou, and honour'd with a Christian name,
 Buy what is woman-born, and feel no shame ?
 Trade in the blood of innocence, and plead
 Expedience as a warrant for the deed ?
 So may the wolf, whom famine has made bold,
 To quit the forest and invade the fold.
 So may the ruffian, who with ghostly glide,
 Dagger in hand, steals close to your bedside ;
 Not he, but his emergence forced the door,
 He found it inconvenient to be poor.

“ A Briton knows, or, if he knows it not,
 The Scripture placed within his reach, he ought,
 That souls have no discriminating hue,
 Alike important in their Maker's view ;
 That none are free from blemish since the Fall,
 And love Divine has paid one price for all.
 The wretch that works and weeps without relief
 Has one that notices his silent grief.
 He from whose hand alone all power proceeds,
 Ranks its abuse among the foulest deeds,
 Considers *all* injustice with a frown,
 But *marks* the man that treads his fellow down.
 Remember, Heaven has an avenging rod ;
 To smite the poor is treason against God.”

CHAPTER XVI.

Lady Austen—John Gilpin—Madame Guion—The Colubriad—Cowper's exquisite humour.

A SHORT time before the publication of this volume, the same Divine providence that had prepared for Cowper such a resting-place and home in the family of the Unwin's, brought to their acquaintance a new friend, whose lively wit, and influence over the mind of the poet, were to prove the occasion of the greatest production of his genius. This was Lady Austen, the widow of Sir Robert Austen, and sister of the wife of one of Cowper's neighbours, a clergyman at Clifton, about a mile from Olney. The conversational powers of this lady were great, and Cowper was pleased and delighted for a season with her acquaintance and friendship. He described her to his friend Mr Unwin, as "a woman of fine taste and discernment, with many features of character to admire, but one in particular, on account of the rarity of it, to engage your attention and esteem. She has a degree of gratitude in her composition, so quick a sense of obligation, as is hardly to be found in any rank of life, and, if report say true, is scarce indeed in the superior. Discover but a wish to please her, and she never forgets it; not only thanks you, but the tears

will start into her eyes at the recollection of the smallest service. With these fine feelings, she has the most harmless vivacity you can imagine." Lady Austen, for about two years, occupied as her residence the parsonage which Newton had vacated, the garden of which adjoined that of Cowper, with a door opened by Newton between them. During those two years the two families were on terms of intercourse so uninterrupted and intimate, that they almost made one household, and for a season were accustomed to dine alternately in each other's house. "Lady Austen and we," said Cowper, in one of his letters to Mr Unwin, "pass our days alternately at each others *château*. In the morning I walk with one or other of the ladies, and in the afternoon wind thread. Thus did Hercules, and thus probably did Samson, and thus do I; and were both these heroes living, I should not fear to challenge them to a trial of skill in that business, or doubt to beat them both. As to killing lions, and other amusements of that kind, with which they were so delighted, I should be their humble servant, and beg to be excused."

How animating and happy was the influence exerted by Lady Austen, and this agreeable change and excitement in their manner of life at Olney, upon the mind and spirits of Cowper may be judged from that exquisitely beautiful poem addressed to her in a letter during her absence for the first winter, in London. It has a meaning, judged by the result, even deeper than any anticipation in the mind of the writer; for indeed by that friendship Divine providence was arranging the causes and occasions of the most precious and inestimable effort of Cowper's genius. In

this little epistle itself are some of the finest lines Cowper ever wrote.

"Mysterious are His ways, whose power
Brings forth that unexpected hour
When minds that never met before
Shall meet, unite, and part no more.
It is the allotment of the skies,
The hand of the Supremely Wise,
That guides and governs our affections,
And plans and orders our connexions;
Directs us in our distant road,
And marks the bounds of our abode.
Thus we were settled when you found us,
Peasants and children all around us,
Not dreaming of so dear a friend,
Deep in the abyss of Silver End.

* * * * *

This page of Providence quite new,
And now just opening to our view,
Employs our present thoughts and pains
To guess and spell what it contains:
But day by day, and year by year,
Will make the dark enigma clear,
And furnish us perhaps at last,
Like other scenes already past,
With proof that we and our affairs
Are part of a Jehovah's cares;
For God unfolds, by slow degrees,
The purport of His deep decrees,
Sheds every hour a clearer light
In aid of our defective sight,
And spreads at length before the soul
A beautiful and perfect whole,
Which busy man's inventive brain
Tolls to anticipate in vain.

"Say, Anna, had you never known
The beauties of a rose full blown,
Could you, though luminous your eye,
By looking on the bud, descry,
Or guess, with a prophetic power,
The future splendour of the flower?
Just so the Omnipotent, who turns
The system of a world's concerns,

From mere minutiae can educe
Events of most important use,
And bid a dawning sky display
The blaze of a meridian day.
The works of man tend one and all,
As needs they must, from great to small,
And vanity absorbs at length
The monuments of human strength.
But who can tell how vast the plan
Which this day's incident began?
Too small, perhaps, the slight occasion
For our dim-sighted observation,
It pass'd unnoticed, as the bird
That cleaves the yielding air unheard,
And yet may prove, when understood,
A harbinger of endless good."

The friendship of Lady Austen was a cordial influence provided for him at a period when the cloud of dejection upon his mind seemed to be gathering unusual blackness. His interesting and absorbing occupation with his first poetical volume was ended by its publication; and as yet nothing had come to supply its place. Some of the criticisms upon that volume had a depressing effect upon his spirits for a season, and would even have led him, he somewhere intimates, to renounce poetry altogether, had it not been for the friendly and encouraging admiration of his volume expressed by Dr Franklin. Cowper told his friend Unwin that "he felt, on after consideration, rather ashamed of having been at all dejected by the censure of the critical reviewers, who certainly could not read without prejudice a book replete with opinions and doctrines to which they could not subscribe." Southey remarked, in regard to the same unfavourable review, that "without prejudice on the score of opinions, and without individual ill-will, or the envious disposition which not unfrequently produces the

same effect, a dull critic or a pert one is generally ready enough to condemn what he wants heart to feel, or understanding to appreciate. This reviewal of Cowper's first volume is one of those defunct criticisms which deserves to be disinterred and gibbeted for the sake of example."

Among the expedients devised by Lady Austen to please and animate the mind of Cowper, when the alarming tendency to deep dejection was again becoming manifest, and occupation and amusement were requisite, was the happy gift of a small portable printing-press, on which he could strike off his own compositions. At the same time one of his dearest friends and correspondents, the Rev. Mr Bull, of Newport Pagnell, a dissenting minister of deep piety and varied learning and abilities, put the poetry of Madame Guion into his hands, and engaged him in the pleasant and beneficial labour of translating many of her pieces into English verse. In the letter to his friend Unwin, giving an account of this employment, he related in his exquisitely sportive way an encounter which he had witnessed between a kitten and a viper, which he also threw into the shape of verse in that amusing piece of humour entitled the "Colubriad." Some of the most beautiful songs were also composed by the poet, for Lady Austen to set them to appropriate music, and play them upon the harpsichord. One of these songs was the ballad on the "Loss of the Royal George," with Admiral Kempenfelt and her whole crowded crew of eight hundred men. This was one of Cowper's most favourite compositions: "Toll for the brave." He translated it into Latin.

At the same time, or very near it, on the occasion of a story related by Lady Austen, he composed the humorous

ballad of "John Gilpin;" and the success of the effort had the happiest effect upon his own spirits. He was sinking into deep dejection. Lady Austen, who had been accustomed to try every possible resource for his relief, observed with pain, in their evening circle, how the cloud was deepening, and remembering from her childhood the story of "John Gilpin," repeated it to Cowper with such admirable merriment and humour, that, as Hayley says, "its effect upon his fancy had the air of enchantment." He told Lady Austen the next morning that the drollery took such possession of him that during the greater part of the night he had been kept awake by convulsions of laughter, brought on by the recollection of her story; and indeed that he could not help turning it into a ballad. The piece immediately became celebrated, for his friend Unwin sent it at once to the "Public Advertiser." It was recited with great comic power by Henderson; it made Cowper's friends laugh tears; and it proved an inexhaustible source of merriment with multitudes who never dreamed of Cowper being the author. "They do not always laugh so innocently, and at so small an expense," said Cowper in a letter to his friend Unwin: "a melancholy that nothing else so effectually disperses, engages me in the arduous task of being merry by force; and, strange as it may seem, the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood; and, but for that saddest mood, perhaps had never been written at all." Three years afterward, while "The Task" was passing through the press, "John Gilpin," which had not even then been published with Cowper's name, was recited by Henderson at a series of nightly readings to crowded audiences in London. The

ballad was reprinted from the old newspaper, and "Gilpin," passing at full stretch by "The Bell" at Edmonton, was to be seen in all the print-shops. One printseller sold six thousand; and Southey informs us that the profits of these recitations by a reader so unrivalled as Henderson, were eight hundred pounds. Southey says that at the close of one of his performances, a person from the crowd wriggled up to him and exclaimed, "Pray, who did teach you to read, Mr Henderson?" "My mother, sir," was his reply.

Newton told Cowper what amusement his famous horseman was giving to the public; but the letter elicited a sad reply (though not so sad as he sometimes wrote,) for he was now again passing, without the company of Newton, through the valley of the shadow of death. "I have produced many things," said he, "under the influence of despair, which hope would not have permitted to spring. But if the soil of that melancholy in which I have walked so long has thrown up here and there an unprofitable fungus, it is well at least that it is not chargeable with having brought forth poison. Like you, I see, or think I can see, that Gilpin may have its use. Causes in appearance trivial produce often the most beneficial consequences; and perhaps my volumes may now travel to a distance which, if they had not been ushered into the world by that notable horseman, they would never have reached."

It was just about the time of the composition of this ballad that Cowper wrote another, for Lady Austen to compose the music, being a playful account of a journey attempted by Cowper and Mrs Unwin to Clifton, the abode of Lady Austen's sister in their neighbourhood. Cowper entitled it "The distressed Travellers, or Labour

in vain, an excellent new song to a tune never sung before." This poem was published in the "Monthly Magazine" for January 1808, but from that time to the publication of Southey's edition of the works of the poet in 1836, was never printed in any collection :

"I sing of a journey to Clifton
 We would have perform'd, if we could,
 Without cart or barrow to lift on
 Poor Mary and me through the flood.
 Slee, ala, alud,
 Stuck in the mud ;
 Oh, it is pretty to wade through a flood !

So away we went slipping and sliding
 Hop, hop, *à la mode de deux* frogs.
 'Tis near as good walking as riding
 When ladies are dress'd in their clogs.
 Wheels no doubt,
 Go briskly about,
 But they clatter, and rattle, and make such a rout !

SHE.

Well now, I protest, it is charming ;
 How finely the weather improves !
 That cloud, though, is rather alarming ;
 How slowly and stately it moves !

HE.

Pshaw ! never mind ;
 'Tis not in the wind ;
 We are travelling south, and shall leave it behind.

SHE.

I am glad we are come for an airing,
 For folks may be pounded and penn'd,
 Until they grow rusty, not caring
 To stir half a mile to an end.

HE.

The longer we stay
 The longer we may ;
 It is a folly to think about weather or way.

SHE.

But now I begin to be frighted ;
If I fall, what a way I should roll !
I am glad that the bridge was indicted—
Stop ! stop ! I am sunk in a hole !

HE.

Nay, never care !
'Tis a common affair ;
You'll not be the last that will set a foot there.

SHE.

Let me breathe now a little, and ponder
On what it were better to do ;
That terrible lane I see yonder
I think we shall never get through.

HE.

So I think, I,
But by the by,
We never shall know, if we never should try.

SHE.

But should we get there how shall we get home
What a terrible deal of bad road we have past !
Slipping and sliding, and if we should come
To a difficult stile, I am ruin'd at last.
Oh this lane !
Now it is plain,
That struggling and striving is labour in vain.

HE.

Stick fast, then, while I go and look !

SHE.

Don't go away, for fear I should fall !

HE.

I have examin'd it every nook,
And what you have here is a sample of all.
Come, wheel round ;
The dirt we have found
Would be an estate at a farthing a pound.

Now, sister Ann, the guitar you must take.
Set it, and sing it, and make it a song.
I have varied the verse for variety's sake,
And cut it off short because it was long.
'Tis hobbling and lame,
Which critics won't blame,
For the sense and the sound they say should be the same.

Such pieces as these reveal a ruling characteristic of Cowper's mind, heart, and fancy. It was a propensity to fun and humour, as deep and genuine as ever accompanied or constituted the power of genius. But in the extreme it is a dangerous characteristic. It was in him so strong a disposition, that unless it had been repressed by the prevalence of his constitutional malady, it must have worked mischief, must have absorbed and triumphed over the graver meditative power of his imagination, and might have ruled in his works to the exclusion of serious and religious themes, instead of sparkling in them, and sweetly, richly colouring and enlivening them. The tendency and habit of jocoseness, indulged and cherished, have gone sometimes even in clergymen to an extreme that has quite destroyed their usefulness; and, had it not been for Cowper's mental depression, perhaps he would have continued in life, just as he says he set out, only to giggle and to make giggle. With such an exhilarating fountain of humour, and enjoyment of wit, and such an irresistible proneness to laughable and comic description, had he been permitted by uninterrupted health and elasticity of spirits to mingle freely with the polished circles of his family in high and fashionable life, the society by which he must have been surrounded would have borne him away upon its surface, and he never would have been

known as "England's Christian poet." Perhaps it was necessary, for the consecration of his genius to the highest themes, to mingle that gloom of depression in the habit of his heart ; if so, then that exquisitely beautiful hymn, composed on the eve of his madness, had a meaning extended over his whole life, of which he little dreamed.

CHAPTER XVII.

Cowper's passion for fun and humour—The discipline to balance it—
Exquisite lessons and scenes of social joy in his poems—Mingled
sportiveness and solemnity of his letters to Newton.

PERFORMANCE in this world is often prevented by theoretical perfection ; and one evil has to be set to keep guard over another. The skilful workman has to prepare his finest gold for use and workmanship with a portion of alloy. A cold day in nature is sometimes necessary to set the vegetation ; and storms are necessary to prevent even our finest weather from injuring us. Cowper's native tendency to social pleasantry and humour perhaps needed to be chastened, or at least balanced, for under all his gloom the drollest recollections were sometimes uppermost in his mind. The only thing he remembered of his friend Hill's poetry in the Nonsense Club, in their early days, was the Homeric line, "To whom replied the Devil, yard-long tailed." Such snatches of ridiculous recollections he is continually presenting in his letters ; one of them to Newton he finishes with a reference to Dr Scott, at the close of whose sermon he gives Newton an account of a droll blunder made by the

preacher, who, quoting a passage of Scripture, said to his hearers, "Open your wide mouths, and I will fill them."

Now, nothing is more delightful, more genial and congenial than such a disposition. Deliver us from men who cannot relish pleasantry, and, if need be, even in the midst of misery ; such men cannot have your entire confidence, but are to be held as Shakspeare or Luther would have regarded men who hated music. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones." But the ceaseless thirst and craving for amusement and merriment, as if it were the whole of life, is a fever that dries and consumes the soul more fatally. A creature constituted with a very keen relish for the pleasures of a merry circle, and habituated to rely upon them, is not fitted to encounter any change of weather, or to ride through rough seas. Such a person is like a vessel carelessly loaded with such materials, that there is danger of a sudden shifting of the cargo, and inevitable shipwreck in consequence.

"Luxury gives the mind a childish cast,
And while she polishes, perverts the taste.
Habits of close attention, thinking heads,
Become more rare as dissipation spreads,
Till authors hear at length one general cry,
'Tickle and entertain us, or we die."

There is a higher quality. "Is any merry? Let him sing psalms;" *that* taste and faculty is the celestial balance in the soul. If any man has learned to do *that* with the heart, he has learned it on such grounds as have taught him most solemnly and profoundly the madness of the man of mere mirthfulness ; but there is room for happiness and joy in his affections, his mind, his whole being, to the

utmost extent to which occasion may ever call for merriment. But until he has learned to do *that*, until he has gained that hope which is an anchor in eternity, the end of his mirth is heaviness ; for, "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry," is the rule, but the heart of fools is in the house where such mirth reigns, and folly is joy, and joy is folly, to him that is destitute of wisdom.

That proverb also is as full of truth as pithiness, that "the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot ;" and persons who live for nothing but to giggle and make giggle are the most unmirthful beings in the world. Cowper's early associates, when he knew nothing higher or better than worldly mirth, were sad illustrations. A creature suddenly paralysed and stiffened in the act and attitude of boisterous laughter would be a hideous sight ; but an immortal being who knows nothing but giggling and merriment, and imagines that life has no other end than such uninterrupted enjoyment, would be, to spiritual spectators at least, a much more deplorable spectacle.

How beautiful, in this connexion, are Cowper's lines on social life and conversation, along with that exquisite picture of the walk to Emmaus ! Well might Cowper ask,

"Is sparkling wit the world's exclusive right ?
The fix'd fee-simple of the vain and light ?"

Nay, does it not much rather belong to those who have received in fee-simple an eternal inheritance of love, joy, peace ? Assuredly the hope of heaven cannot quench or obscure the play of a faculty whose happiest permanent abode is in that mind which is the most serene and thoughtful. Piety restrains and curbs its wantonness, and prevents it from

assuming the part of the mere trifle, and thus at the same time gives it a usefulness unknown before, and makes it shine the brighter for its purification. Such conclusions were the fruits of Cowper's own experience, having tried both the paths of this world's merriment and of religious peace and joy ; and he has thrown the celestial knowledge he had gained into some of the most beautiful lessons and pictures of his poetry.

" The mind, dispatch'd upon her busy toil,
Should range where Providence has bless'd the soil ;
Visiting every flower with labour meet,
And gathering all her treasures, sweet by sweet,
She should imbue the tongue with what she sips,
And shed the balmy blessing on the lips,
That good diffused may more abundant grow,
And speech may praise the power that bids it flow.

" Yet Fashion, leader of a chattering train,
Whom man for his own hurt permits to reign,
Who shifts and changes all things but his shape,
And would degrade her votary to an ape,
The fruitful parent of abuse and wrong,
Holds a usurp'd dominion o'er his tongue ;
Here sits and prompts him with his own disgrace,
Prescribes the theme, the tone, and the grimace,
And, when accomplish'd in her wayward school,
Calls gentleman whom she has made a fool.
'Tis an unalterable, fix'd decree,
That none could frame or ratify but she,
That heaven and hell, and righteousness and sin,
Snares in his path, and foes that lurk within,
God and his attributes (a field of day
Where 'tis an angel's happiness to stray)
Fruits of his love and wonders of his might,
Be never named in ears esteem'd polite ;
That he who dares, when she forbids, be grave,
Shall stand proscribed a madman or a knave,
A close designer, not to be believed,
Or, if excused that charge, at least deceived.

* * * * *
The time is short, and there are souls on earth,
Though future pain may serve for present mirth,

Acquainted with the woes that fear or shame
 By fashion taught, forbade them once to name,
 And having felt the pangs you deem a jest,
 Have proved them truths too big to be express'd.
 Go seek on revelation's hallow'd ground,
 Sure to succeed, the remedy they found ;
 Touch'd by that Power that you have dared to mock,
 That makes seas stable, and dissolves the rock,
 Your heart shall yield a life-renewing stream,
 That fools, as you have done, shall call a dream.

" It happen'd on a solemn evening tide,
 Soon after He that was our Surety died,
 Two bosom friends, each pensively inclined,
 The scene of all those sorrows left behind,
 Sought their own village, busied as they went,
 In musings worthy of the great event.
 They spake of Him they loved, of Him whose life,
 Though blameless, had incurr'd perpetual strife,
 Whose deeds had left, in spite of hostile arts,
 A deep memorial graven on their hearts.
 The recollection, like a vein of ore,
 The further traced, enrich'd them still the more.
 They thought Him, and they justly thought Him, one
 Sent to do more than He appear'd to have done,
 To exalt a people, and to place them high
 Above all else : and wonder'd He should die.
 Ere yet they brought their journey to an end,
 A stranger join'd them, courteous as a friend,
 And ask'd them, with a kind, engaging air,
 What their affliction was, and begg'd a share.
 Inform'd, He gather'd up the broken thread,
 And, truth and wisdom gracing all He said,
 Explain'd, illustrated, and touch'd so well
 The tender theme on which they chose to dwell,
 That, reaching home, the night, they said, is near,
 We must not now be parted, sojourn here.
 The new acquaintance soon became a guest,
 And, made so welcome at their simple feast,
 He bless'd the bread, but vanish'd at the word,
 And left them both exclaiming, "T was the Lord !
 Did not our hearts feel all He deign'd to say ?
 Did they not burn within us by the way ?

" Now theirs was converse, such as it behoves
 Man to maintain, and such as God approves.
 Their views, indeed, were indistinct and dim,
 But yet successful, being aim'd at Him.

Christ and His character their only scope,
 Their object, and their subject, and their hope,
 They felt what it became them much to feel ;
 And, wanting Him to loose the sacred seal,
 Found Him as prompt as their desire was true
 To spread the new-born glories in their view.
 Well ! what are ages, and the lapse of time,
 Match'd against truths as lasting as sublime ?
 Can length of years on God Himself exact ?
 Or make that fiction which was once a fact ?
 No ! marble and recording brass decay,
 And, like the graver's memory, pass away ;
 The works of man inherit, as is just,
 Their author's frailty, and return to dust.
 But truth Divine for ever stands secure,
 Its head is guarded, as its base is sure ;
 Fix'd in the rolling flood of endless years
 The pillar of the eternal plan appears,
 The raving storm and dashing wave defies,
 Built by that Architect who built the skies.
 Hearts may be found, that harbour at this hour
 That love of Christ, and all its quickening power,
 And lips unstain'd by folly or by strife,
 Whose wisdom, drawn from the deep well of life,
 Tastes of its healthful origin, and flows,
 A Jordan for the ablution o' our woes.
 O days of heaven, and nights of equal praise,
 Serene and peaceful as those heavenly days,
 When souls, drawn upward in communion sweet,
 Enjoy the stillness of some close retreat,
 Discourse, as if released, and safe at home,
 Of dangers past, and wonders yet to come,
 And spread the sacred treasures of the breast
 Upon the lap of covenanted rest ! "

In contrast with this most attractive and delightful picture, let us note how the sight of the undevout gaiety of a thoughtless world, in one of the great exchanges of its mirthfulness, affected Cowper. He is writing his friend Unwin in regard to the scenes at Brighton. "There is not, I think, so melancholy a sight in the world (an hospital is not to be compared with it) as that of a thousand

persons distinguished by the name of gentry, who, gentle perhaps by nature, and made more gentle by education, have the appearance of being innocent and inoffensive, yet being destitute of all religion, or not at all governed by the religion they profess, are none of them at any great distance from an eternal state, where self-deception will be impossible, and where amusements cannot enter. Some of them, we may say, will be reclaimed; it is most probable, indeed, that some of them will, because mercy, if one may be allowed the expression, is fond of distinguishing itself by seeking its objects among the most desperate class; but the Scripture gives no encouragement to the warmest charity to hope for deliverance for them all. When I see an afflicted and unhappy man, I say to myself, 'There is, perhaps, a man whom the world would envy if they knew the value of his sorrows, which are possibly intended only to soften his heart, and to turn his affections toward their proper centre.' But when I see or hear of a crowd of voluptuaries, who have no ears but for music, no eyes but for splendour, and no tongue but for impertinence and folly, I say, or at least I see occasion to say, 'This is madness; this, persisted in, must have a tragical conclusion. It will condemn you not only as Christians unworthy of the name, but as intelligent creatures. You know by the light of nature, if you have not quenched it, that there is a God, and that a life like yours cannot be according to His will.'"

Some of Cowper's letters to Newton, as well as his other correspondents, are exquisitely sportive. His sense of the ludicrous was keen and delicate, and no man that ever wrote English was happier in his descriptions of humorous

and ridiculous scenes and encounters. We may refer, for illustration in his prose, to his letter to Newton, giving an account of the beadle thrashing the thief, the constable the beadle, and the lady the constable; a story which in rhyme would have made a rival of "John Gilpin," and would give some original Cruikshanks in engraving a subject of admirable humour. His description of the life of an antediluvian, and also of the chase that took place in Olney on the escape of his tame hare, and of the donkey that ran away with the market-woman; as also his letters in the form of prose, but in swift galloping metre, are happy illustrations of his native propensity and power. Perhaps the very drollest letters in the whole of his private correspondence, as well as the darkest and gloomiest, are to Newton; sufficiently refuting the ill-natured insinuation which we have already had occasion to notice on the part of Southey, that it seemed as if Cowper always went to his correspondence with Newton as if he were a sinner going to the confessional, or toiling under a task. There are numerous incidental notices, as well as whole epistles, that demonstrate how very unjust any intimation of this nature must have been; unjust to Cowper himself as well as Newton, and conveying an idea of constraint, if not dissimulation, where there was never anything but openness and freedom.

For example, Cowper sent to Newton, in one of his letters, the following lines, entitled "Mary and John":—

"If John marries Mary, and Mary alone,
'Tis a very good match between Mary and John.
Should John wed a score, oh, the claws and the scratches!
It can't be a match; 'tis a bundle of matches."

In another letter, November 27, 1781, he refers to this trifle, and says to Newton, "I never wrote a copy of 'Mary and John' in my life, except that which I sent to you. It was one of those bagatelles which sometimes spring up like mushrooms in my imagination, either while I am writing, or just before I begin. *I sent it to you, because to you I send anything that I think may raise a smile,* but should never have thought of multiplying the impression."

Now let us take, as additional instances of the familiar and playful attitude of his mind in his correspondence with Newton, first, an amusing letter, which beautifully sets forth his motive and manner in writing his admirable poem "On Charity;" and second, as an example of the spontaneous ease with which his thoughts flowed in the particular form of versification in which that poem was cast, his poetical letter to Mrs Newton, thanking her for a present of oysters. Both these epistles were in the same year, 1781.

"My very dear friend, I am going to send, what when you have read, you may scratch your head, and say I suppose, there's nobody knows, whether what I have got, be verse or not;—by the tune and the time, it ought to be rhyme; but if it be, did ever you see, of late or of yore, such a ditty before?"

"I have writ 'Charity,' not for popularity, but as well as I could, in hopes to do good; and if the 'Reviewer' should say to be sure, the gentleman's muse wears Methodist shoes, you may know by her pace, and talk about grace, that she and her bard have little regard for the

taste and fashions, and ruling passions, and hoidening play, of the modern day ; and though she assume a borrowed plume, and now and then wear a tittering air, 'tis only her plan, to catch if she can, the giddy and gay, as they go that way, by a production of a new construction ; she has baited her trap, in the hope to snap all that may come, with a sugar-plum. His opinion in this will not be amiss ; 'tis what I intend, my principal end ; and if I succeed, and folks should read, till a few are brought to a serious thought, I shall think I am paid for all I have said, and all I have done, although I have run, many a time, after a rhyme, as far as from hence to the end of my sense, and by hook or by crook, write another book, if I live and am here, another year.

“ I have heard before of a room with a floor, laid upon springs, and such like things, with so much art in every part, that when you went in, you was forced to begin a minuet pace, with an air and a grace, swimming about, now in and now out, with a deal of state, in a figure of eight, without pipe or string, or any such thing ; and now I have writ, in a rhyming fit, what will make you dance, and as you advance, will keep you still, though against your will, dancing away, alert and gay, till you come to an end of what I have penn'd, which that you may do, ere madam and you are quite worn out with jigging about, I take my leave, and here you receive a bow profound, down to the ground, from your humble me.—
W. C.”

The other epistle to Mrs Newton is one of the happiest specimens of Cowper's perfectly natural and easy com-

mand of the best language, the aptest familiar words, trooping spontaneously to their places in flowing and harmonious verse ; an illustration of what he once told Mr Unwin, that when he thought at all, he thought most naturally in rhyme.

“ A noble theme demands a noble verse,
 In such I thank you for your fine *oysters*.
 The barrel was magnificently large,
 But being sent to Olney at free charge,
 Was not inserted in the driver's list,
 And therefore overlook'd, forgot, or miss'd.
 For when the messenger whom we dispatch'd
 Inquired for oysters, Hob his noddle scratch'd,
 Denying that his waggon or his wain
 Did any such commodity contain,
 In consequence of which, your welcome boon
 Did not arrive till yesterday at noon ;
 In consequence of which some chanced to die,
 And some, though very sweet, were very dry.
 Now madam says (and what she says must still
 Deserve attention, say she what she will)
 That what we call the diligence, *because*
 It goes to London with a swifter pace,
 Would better suit the carriage of your gift,
 Returning downward with a pace as swift ;
 And therefore recommends it with this aim,
 To save at least three days, the price the same ;
 For though it will not carry or convey
 For less than twelve pence, send whate'er you may,
 For oysters bred upon the salt sea-shore,
 Pack'd in a barrel, they will charge no more.
 News have I none that I can deign to write,
 Save that it rain'd prodigiously last night ;
 And that ourselves were, at the seventh hour,
 Caught in the first beginning of the shower ;
 But walking, running, and with much ado,
 Got home, just time enough to be wet through,
 Yet both are well, and, wondrous to be told,
 Soused as we were, we yet have caught no cold ;
 And wishing just the same good hap to you,
 We say, good madam, and good sir, adieu.”

At a date some two years later than this, he tells Newton that he would as soon allow himself the liberty of writing a sheet full of trifles to one of the four Evangelists, as to him. But very speedily after that, we find him writing to the same friend with as much drollery as ever. The truth is, he always wrote according to the frame of his mind and feelings at the moment, and on whatever topic the train of association landed him when putting pen to paper, on that he wrote just what spontaneously he thought and felt. The writing of letters was never irksome to him, though the beginning of them sometimes was. He told Newton in one of his letters in 1784, that the morning was his writing time, but in the morning he had no spirits, and therefore so much the worse for his correspondents. "As the evening approaches, I grow more alert, and when I am retiring to bed, am more fit for mental occupation than at any other time. So it fares with us whom they call nervous. The watch is irregularly wound up; it goes in the night when it is not wanted, and in the day stands still."

A year previous to this, he had been more dejected and distressed than usual, so much so, that even a visit from Newton, "the friend of his heart, with whom he had formerly taken sweet counsel," not only failed to comfort him, but added, as he said, the bitterness of mortification to the sadness of despair. His nights were becoming a terror to him, and he told Newton that he was more and more harassed by dreams in the night, and more deeply poisoned by them in the following day. He feared a return of his malady in all its force. "I know the

ground," said he, "before I tread upon it. It is hollow; it is agitated; it suffers shocks in every direction; it is like the soil of Calabria—all whirlpool and undulation." Happily, these terrible forebodings were not then fulfilled; it was not till four years had elapsed that the dreaded prostration came; and his letters continued to be as cheerful as usual. The following to Newton in 1784, beautifully shews what a combination of enjoyment in the rural sights and sounds of nature, and of solemn meditation on the verge of what seemed an eternal gloom, at once occupied his sensibilities:—

"My greenhouse is never so pleasant as when we are just upon the point of being turned out of it. The gentleness of the autumnal suns, and the calmness of this latter season, make it a much more agreeable retreat than we ever find it in the summer; when, the winds being generally brisk, we cannot cool it by admitting a sufficient quantity of air, without being at the same time incommoded by it. But now I sit with all the windows and the door wide open, and am regaled with the scent of every flower, in a garden as full of flowers as I have known how to make it. We keep no bees, but if I lived in a hive I should hardly hear more of their music. All the bees in the neighbourhood resort to a bed of mignonne, opposite to the window, and pay me for the honey they get out of it by a hum, which, though rather monotonous, is as agreeable to my ear as the whistling of my linnets. All the sounds that nature utters are delightful, at least in this country. I should not, perhaps, find the roaring of lions in Africa or of bears in Russia very pleas-

ing, but I know no beast in England whose voice I do not account musical, save and except always the braying of an ass. The notes of all our birds and fowls please me without an exception. I should not, indeed, think of keeping a goose in a cage, that I might hang him up in the parlour for the sake of his melody, but a goose upon a common or in a farm-yard is no bad performer ; and as to insects, if the black beetle, and beetles indeed of all hues, will keep out of my way, I have no objection to any of the rest ; on the contrary, in whatever key they sing, from the gnat's fine treble to the bass of the humble bee, I admire them all.

“ Seriously, however, it strikes me as a very observable instance of Providential kindness to man, that such an exact accord has been contrived between his ear and the sounds with which, at least in a rural situation, it is almost every moment visited. All the world is sensible of the uncomfortable effect that certain sounds have often upon the nerves, and consequently upon the spirits. And if a sinful world had been filled with such as would have curdled the blood, and have made the sense of hearing a perpetual inconvenience, I do not know that we should have had a right to complain. But now the fields, the woods, the gardens, have each their concert, and the ear of man is for ever regaled by creatures who seem only to please themselves. Even the ears that are deaf to the gospel are continually entertained, though without knowing it, by sounds for which they are solely indebted to its Author. There is somewhere in infinite space a world that does not roll within the precincts of mercy, and as it is reason-

able, and even Scriptural, to suppose that there is music in heaven, in those dismal regions perhaps the reverse of it is found ; tones so dismal as to make woe itself more insupportable, and to acuminate even despair. But my paper admonishes me in good time to draw the reins, and to check the descent of my fancy into deeps with which she is but too familiar."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Lady Austen's suggestion of "The Sofa"—Composition of "The Task"
—Exasperation of Cowper's gloom—Peculiarities and causes of it.

IN the early part of the summer of 1783, Lady Austen was endeavouring to prevail upon Cowper, as she had often done without success, to try his poetical powers in blank verse. At length he promised her that he would do so, if she would furnish him with a subject. "Oh," said she, "you can write upon anything ; you can never be in want of a subject ; write upon this sofa." This answer, made without a moment's reflection, seems to have fallen like a kindling element, suggestive, exciting, into the poet's mind. Perhaps it roused up in a moment a train of domestic pictures, associations, enjoyments : at any rate it set Cowper to thinking, and forthwith he began a poem on that very theme, which wandered on, from subject to subject, from book to book, in pleasing, graceful variety, till it grew to the form of that finest production of his genius, "The Task," one of the most truly religious, yet one of the most popular poems in the English language. The first book, "The Sofa," was completed in August 1783, having been begun probably in June ; and in November 1784, the whole poem had gone to the press. Cowper was, therefore,

engaged upon it about a year and three months. He wrote sometimes an hour a day, sometimes half an hour, sometimes two hours ; and he says that he found it a severe exercise to mould and fashion the composition to his mind. Whether he was engaged upon a serious or comic subject, he has himself remarked that the deep dejection of his spirits never seemed to interfere in the least degree with the activity of his mental powers.

During the whole period of the composition of this exquisite poem, so tender and sacred in feeling, so rich and heavenly in religious thought, so inspired at once with the sweetest contrition and faith of a submissive and believing heart, and the sublimest fervour of devotion, Cowper's own religious gloom was almost uninterrupted. He thought himself shut out, by a particular edict, from God's mercy, excluded for ever from heaven, and doomed to destruction. He thought that for him there was no access to the mercy-seat, that he had no right to pray ; indeed, he told his friend Mr Bull, in one of his letters, that he had not asked a blessing upon his food for ten years, and did not expect that he should ever ask it again. "Prove to me," said he, "that I have a right to pray, and I will pray without ceasing ; yea, and pray too even in the belly of this hell, compared with which Jonah's was a palace, a temple of the living God. But, let me add, there is no encouragement in the Scripture so comprehensive as to include my case, nor any consolation so effectual as to reach it." "And yet the sin by which I am excluded from the privileges I once enjoyed, you would account no sin ; you would tell me that it was a duty."

In such passages as these we seem to be looking into

the blackness of darkness ; it is an incomprehensible mystery of madness and despair. The imaginary sin to which Cowper here refers, must have been his refusing to yield to the temptation, a second time presented in his insanity, of self-destruction, or his not renewing the attempt, when mercifully frustrated ; a temptation under the satanic, infernal delusion of its being a sacrifice to which God called him, so that his not performing it had shut the door of God's mercy against him for ever. Sometimes, when he sat down to write his dearest friends, this impression, with unmitigated, intolerable severity, so burdened him, that he could write on nothing else than the topic of his religious woe. This was very naturally the case, most frequently in writing to Newton, with whom he once enjoyed so many years of brightest, sweetest Christian fellowship, ineffably serene and delightful, the genuineness, truth, and heavenly origin of which, as the work of the Divine Spirit, he never for one moment doubted.

He begins the first letter he wrote to Newton in the year 1784, just after the publication of "The Task," by saying that he could not indeed tell what events might happen in this new year of their existence, but that Newton might rest convinced that be they what they might, not one of them could ever come a messenger of good to his despairing lost friend. "It is an alleviation of the woes even of an unenlightened man, that he can wish for death, and indulge a hope at least that in death he shall find deliverance. But loaded as my life is with despair, I have no such comfort as would result from a supposed probability of better things to come, were it once ended. Pass through whatever difficulties, dangers, and afflictions I may, I am not a

whit the nearer home, unless a dungeon may be called so. This is no very agreeable theme ; but in so great a dearth of subjects to write upon, and especially impressed as I am at this moment with a sense of my own condition, I could choose no other. The weather is an exact emblem of my mind in its present state. A thick fog envelops everything, and at the same time it freezes intensely. You will tell me that this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring, and endeavour to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it ; but it will be lost labour. Nature revives again ; but a soul once slain, lives no more. The hedge that has been apparently dead, is not so ; it will burst into leaf and blossom at the appointed time ; but no such time is appointed for the stake that stands in it. It is as dead as it seems, and will prove itself no dissembler. The latter end of next month will complete a period of eleven years in which I have spoken no other language. It is a long time for a man, whose eyes were once opened, to spend in darkness ; long enough to make despair an inveterate habit ; and such it is in me. My friends, I know, expect that I shall see yet again. They think it necessary to the existence of Divine truth, that he who once had possession of it, should never finally lose it. I admit the solidity of this reasoning in every case but my own. And why not in my own ? For causes which to them it appears madness to allege, but which rest upon my mind with a weight of immovable conviction."

This letter carries us back for some solution of its gloomy mystery to the year 1773, when, after some recovery from the more immediate violence of the attack, the chaos and dethronement of his reason, even in passing

away, left upon the air the black shadows of an eclipse,—that supernatural darkness at noonday, that strange disastrous twilight, in the prevalence of which the birds that sing in the daytime retire to their nests, but all the beasts of the forest begin to creep forth, and the young lions roar after their prey. In that dread eclipse as to his own personal hope of acceptance with God and of eternal mercy, that veiling of the light of the Sun of Righteousness, Cowper's reason (but not his affections) for the most part remained shrouded. Instead of his path being, in respect to its brightness and serenity, in accordance with God's prescribed rule and promise, as the path of the just, shining more and more unto the perfect day, the perfect day had come first with Cowper, and from that point there was a reversal of the rule; so that the shadows deepened and the gloom thickened till we lose sight of the progress of the saint, in the darkest and most impenetrable depths of the valley of death-shadows. It was as if he had set out from the Celestial City, and taken all Bunyan's vivid delineations backward, from the Land Beulah to the Valley of Humiliation, and the conflict with Apollyon, and the smoke and darkness of that other dread valley, which proved to him the River of Death, the end of his pilgrimage, the last of his gloom and sufferings for ever.

Ever since his attack in 1773, the settled type of his derangement had been the obstinate assurance that his own name was blotted from the Book of Life. During that attack, he was at first unwilling to enter Newton's door; but one day having been persuaded to make him a visit, he suddenly determined there to stay, and accord-

ingly remained under Newton's care, in Newton's family, about eighteen months, when quite as suddenly he came to the determination to return. Newton has described his submissiveness to God's will in an early period of this attack, in strong and affecting language. "In the beginning of his disorder," says Newton, "when he was more capable of conversing than he was sometimes afterward, how often have I heard him adore and submit to the sovereignty of God, and declare, though in the most agonising and inconceivable distress, that he was so perfectly satisfied of the wisdom and rectitude of the Lord's appointments, that if he was sure of relieving himself only by stretching out his hand, he would not do it, unless he was equally sure it was agreeable to His will that he should do it." The same spirit of entire submission to God's will marked all the changes of his delirium. In October he attempted suicide, under the dreadful impression that this was the Divine will made known for his obedience. The turn which his malady thus took was entirely unexpected, and it rendered the most incessant watchfulness absolutely necessary. That was while Mr and Mrs Newton were absent in Warwickshire; but Newton has remarked that this very attempt at self-destruction was but a new form and proof of his dear friend's submission to God's will, "since it was solely owing to the power the enemy had of impressing upon his distorted imagination that it was the will of God that he should, after the example of Abraham, perform an expressive act of obedience, and offer, not a son, but himself."

That impression always remained by him, or rather the belief that he had forfeited God's mercy, and shut himself out from hope and heaven by not executing the will of

Jehovah when it was made known to him, and the appointed opportunity had come. By letting that opportunity pass, he thought he had brought upon himself a perpetual exclusion from God's favour. For a long time he thought that even to implore mercy would be just opposing the determinate counsel of God. It was a state of mind that increased the anxiety of his friends in every recurrence of his disease, and tried their care and tenderness to the uttermost. In 1787, during the dreadful attack of several months' duration, he again attempted his own death, and would certainly have accomplished it, if Mrs Unwin had not been providentially directed to the room where he had just suspended himself by the neck, and where he must have died in a few moments, had he not been instantly rescued. From this last attack he recovered suddenly, without warning, like a man called at a word from death to life; and no similar access ever took place; but soon after the year 1790 the gloom and dejection of spirits deepened from month to month into a thicker darkness, and more painful distress.

"Amid these dreadful temptations," says the Rev. Mr Greatheed, who knew him intimately, and after his death published some account of his trials, with an interesting review of his life and character, "such was his unshaken submission to what he imagined to be the Divine pleasure, that he was accustomed to say, 'If holding up my finger would save from endless torments, I would not do it against the will of God.' He never dared to enter a place of worship when invited to do so; he has said, 'Had I the universe, I would give it to go with you; but I dare not do it against the will of God!'"

Sad sufferer under a delusion that seemed to set the

very attributes and commandments of God against one another! We do not wonder that Newton and Mrs Unwin, and his strongest-minded and most religious friends, spoke of it and regarded it as the power of the enemy. With the New Testament before them, what could seem a more palpable and graphic renewal of those malignant, infernal possessions which drew the compassion of our Saviour, and required the exercise of his omnipotence. "Whom Satan hath bound, lo, these thirteen years!" Justly did they reason, and believe that something more than a natural power was here at work, and that only a supernatural interposition could effect a cure. Sad sufferer! yet not so sad as happy, being under the care of God; for He was with thee, though thou knewest it not. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then Thou knewest my path! Happy, since He who suffered thee to be thus tempted was able to save thee to the uttermost, was refining thee for greater usefulness, and was preparing for thee, out of this exceeding weight of trial, a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory!

Now and then Cowper would utter in his letters to his friends some sweet impressive sentiments, speaking of the sufferings of others, which are applicable with peculiar power and beauty to his own case. How simple and touching the following words in regard to a lovely young person, of unobtrusive but genuine Christian grace and worth, that had just passed away! "The world has its objects of admiration, and God has objects of his love. Those make a noise and perish; and these weep silently for a short season, and then live for ever."

CHAPTER XIX.

Cowper's Christian graces blooming in mid-winter—Depth and reality of his piety proved by his gloom—Assault of Cowper's adversary—Infernal conflicts—Invisible grace—Cowper's great enjoyment in poetical composition.

It was a painfully vivid image with which Cowper conveyed his mental state, when he said that a thick fog enveloped the landscape, and at the same time it was freezing intensely. Again and again we find ourselves inquiring, how could his affections continue so warm, so ardent, so benevolent, his interest so unabated in every good thing, his sympathy for others' woes so tender, and his grateful appreciation of the kindness of others so constant, his sensibilities undiminished to the last, and his feelings of admiration and love, susceptible of new friendships with congenial natures late in life? His power of attraction over others was almost a fascination; and the frankness and cordial sincerity with which he took the new young friends to his heart whom Providence ordained to meet and bless him on his lonely way, were among the most delightful exhibitions of his nature. His own misery never made him misanthropic, but right the contrary; for he was both grateful for his own blessings, and joyful in the happiness of all around him.

"The principal pleasure, indeed," remarks Mr Greatheed, "that Cowper appeared to be capable of receiving, was that which he derived from the happiness of others. Instead of being provoked to discontent and envy by contrasting their comforts with his own afflictions, there evidently was not a benefit which he knew to be enjoyed by others which did not afford him sensible satisfaction; not a suffering they endured which did not add to his pain. To the happiness of those who were privileged with opportunities of shewing their esteem for him he was most tenderly alive. The advancement of the knowledge of Christ in the world at large was always near his heart, and whatever concerned the general welfare of mankind was interesting to him, secluded as he was from the public, and, in common, from religious society. In like manner, from his distant retreat he viewed with painful sensations the progress of infidelity and of sin in every shape. His love to God, though unassisted by a hope of Divine favour, was invariably manifested by an abhorrence of everything he thought dishonourable to the Most High, and a delight in all that tended to His glory."

Unassisted by a hope of the Divine favour! This makes the continued development of Cowper's piety most wonderful. Here was the bush burning, but not consumed. Here was the faith of submission, reverence, and love, glorifying God in the fires as truly, and with a martyr's endurance, as was ever manifested in the fiery furnace. And here was, not less manifestly, a form like unto the Son of God, though here His presence was known only in the patience and meekness of the sufferer, and not in the radiance of a visible shape. Yet it was Divine grace,

nothing less and nothing else, that was shining. And if ever in one case more remarkably than in another John Bunyan's beautiful imagery presented by his Interpreter was fulfilled, it was in Cowper's. "I saw in my dream that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting much water upon it to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter." On the side where the malignant devil is pouring the torrent on the soul, you cannot see the Lord Jesus pouring in the oil of Divine grace; yet the invisible work is the strongest, and the Lord is the conqueror. "I will cool you yet," said Satan, "though I take seven years to do it; you are very hot after Mercy now, but you shall be cool enough by and by." So thought the infernal adversary, when permitted to set himself against this child of God, at the very time when his combined piety and genius were beginning to put forth those precious blossoms and fruits that were to prove like leaves of the tree of life for the healing of the nations.

And the ingredient he was permitted to mingle in that torrent of temptation with which he would fain have overwhelmed Cowper, and utterly extinguished the bright fire that was burning—the ingredient with which he hoped to persuade him, as he once hoped in regard to Job, to curse God and die, was the terrible imagination that he was cut off for ever from God's favour, that God had forgotten to be gracious, and that His mercy was clean gone for evermore. If he could persuade him to despair, he thought he was sure of his victim. For we are saved by hope, and the sanctifying power of faith acts always with

victorious efficacy only through the might of faith's watchword, by the earnest of the Spirit in the heart, *looking unto Jesus*, and exclaiming, "Who loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*!" And though

"The vital savour of His name
Restores our fainting breath,"

yet if a personal distrust can be made to take the place of confidence in Jesus,

"Such unbelief perverts the same
To guilt, despair, and death."

Now this delusion of Cowper, that he was cut off for ever from God's mercy, was certainly from below, not from above, the work of an Enemy, not of a Friend; yet even the practical power of that delusion, and the result on which Satan had relied, could be prevented by the omnipotence of God's invisible grace. And if Cowper could have been carried by the Interpreter to the other side of the emblem, to behold the Divine Redeemer secretly but continually pouring in the oil of Divine grace, to maintain the heavenly fire, then the secret of the mystery of God's dealings with him would have been known beforehand. He was bringing the blind by a way that they knew not. And if Cowper did not know, the angelic guardians—they that wait and watch, ministering unto them who shall be heirs of salvation—must have known God's way, as they maintained for him this spiritual conflict, and must have heard the voice saying, "My grace is sufficient for thee; My strength shall be made perfect in thy weakness."

So, said the Interpreter, "by means of the oil of Christ's grace, notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of His people prove gracious still. And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire, this is to teach thee that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul." And hard indeed it was for Cowper to see ; yet still the work went on ; and though by the messenger of Satan he was not only buffeted, but distressed, perplexed, and in despair, yet was he not forsaken ; cast down he was, yet not destroyed ; and though seemingly always delivered unto death, yet the life that is hid with Christ in God was always manifest. He whom it pleased and became to make the Captain of his saints perfect through suffering, in bringing many sons unto glory, passes the children of light also through many scenes of trial and of darkness. And Cowper certainly was one of those sons brought unto glory in the same way.

Under this extreme severity of discipline, permitted, as Cowper was, to be sifted as wheat by Satan, to be driven by the wind and tossed, to be distracted with frightful dreams in the night-time, and stared at and terrified by a stony-eyed fiend in the day-time, the projection and creation of an inward sullen despair ; permitted to be held in this torturing and frightful misapprehension of the Divine sovereignty in relation to himself, till he became as a withered and wrinkled goat-skin bottle in the smoke, till his very bones became as when one cutteth and cleaveth wood upon the earth ; yet all the while submissive to the Divine will, and in his melancholy misery, unselfish and unrepining to the last ; under such

discipline there would really seem to have been in Cowper's gloomy and despairing experiences more true piety than in many persons' confidences and hopes ; for his heart was filled all the while with a yearning after God and the light of His countenance, as the only relief and blessing which his soul desired. If any man could ever adopt Watts' energetic stanza as the expression of his own feelings, Cowper could—

"Thy shining grace can cheer
The prison where I dwell ;
'Tis Paradise if Thou art here,
If Thou depart, 'tis hell !"

He could not be happy without God. He was unutterably miserable in the bare imagination that God had deserted him. The thought that God had forsaken him was more agonising to him than a world of real miseries, temporal and not spiritual, ever could have been. But even beneath such a nightmare, such an agony, as the supposition of this abandonment by his best and only everlasting Friend, he would not, knowingly, for the universe, have gone in any respect contrary to the will of that Friend ; would not have chosen his own way in anything which he might not feel was God's chosen way, or which he apprehended was contrary to God's will. Now, a more convincing and affecting proof that he was a child of God, though walking in darkness, can hardly be imagined than this. He could have stayed himself, according to the direction given in the fiftieth chapter of Isaiah to those who find themselves walking in darkness and without light, *upon the name of the Lord* ; but the terrible point, the unconquerable fatality of his delusion

was, that the very name of the Lord was against him, and that consistency and truth on the part of God toward His own attributes required Cowper's destruction. We do not remember ever to have met with any other precisely such case on record ; for Cowper would *reason* himself into a *demonstration* on this point, and sometimes would unwind, to the astonishment and compassion of sympathising friends, a portion of the chain of argument by which his soul was thus fettered ; he sets the door ajar, and lets you look into the darkness of his prison ; and though at the same time he sees the light, it is no light for him. The atmosphere of Divine mercy is all around him, but there is a vacuum also between his soul and it, so that, as he conceives, it cannot touch him, and the congruity of God's attributes forbids that it should.

"Water! water! everywhere,
And never a drop to drink!"

The ladder even of Christian experience, Cowper once said, has its foot, its lowest rung, in the abyss ; and there he had stood, if any step above the infernal regions, yet only there, on that lowest round, amid the smoke and horror of thick darkness, accustomed only to infernal experiences, for thirteen years ! If this had been reality, it had been intolerable misery ; if it had been the midnight of absolute despair, it must have produced absolute madness. But it was a delusion, and not unaccompanied with some suspicions, and sometimes actual hopes, of its being such, and therefore it could be borne for a season. It had the unreality, yet at the same time the despotic oppression, of a vivid dream.

It was the hallucination of a mind insane on one idea,

perfectly sound on every other. That one was indeed, in this case, a tremendous despotism, extending over Cowper's everlasting destiny (as he imagined), a certainty and immutability of woe. If it were a reality, instead of an imagination, and *felt* as a reality, it would leave no interval for cheerful occupation, it would permit no beguilement of its horror, nor forgetfulness of such a fate. But it was an *imaginary* despair; and though the mental dejection, along with the nervous derangement which was its physical cause, deepened and darkened even to the end, yet the misery of an absolute despair never could be inflicted by it, nor ever was endured under it. With congenial mental occupation, gentle, tender, sympathising friends, and a heart submissive, even in its darkest midnight mood, to God's will, Cowper enjoyed much; though as often as his attention reverted to that one point of his insanity, and became fixed upon it, all his sensibilities seemed transfixed and agonised there, and he could see and feel nothing but misery.

Nevertheless, the general tone of his correspondence, his life, and his writings, up to a very late period, was cheerful. "The Task," though written throughout beneath that intensely freezing veil of gloom which he describes, is yet a cheerful poem; neither joy nor frost is admitted in it to your sensibility or perception. A tender melancholy runs through it indeed; a pensiveness, deeply touching, and sometimes sad, but nothing of gloom. There is deep pathos, but yet a heavenly hope. Fountains of the purest happiness are opened up in it, of which you feel perfectly assured that the writer must himself have deeply tasted; and scenes of delight and of sweet, heart-felt enjoyment

are presented, of which you know that the poet himself must have been a living part.

Indeed, there is not a poem in the English language that carries deeper conviction, or bears more indisputable, irresistible evidence of having sprung, in every part, from the original experience of the author. It is he himself, his own thoughts, feelings, wishes, manners, habits, tastes, enjoyments, present with you, and you cannot mistake him for a miserable man. He is indeed a man of trials; that is evident; he has seen affliction, is beneath its sacred chastising influence even now, and is, like his beloved Master, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." And yet, he is on the whole, and in the highest sense, a happy man. You cannot help feeling that the mind that, from the treasures of its own experience, and the heart that, from the fountain of its own emotions, could draw forth these rich and beautiful realities and forms of sacred thought and feeling, and take delight in their array, must belong not only to a heavenly but a happy being.

And this indeed was the real circle of Cowper's existence; here was his own mansion, with its heavenly furniture and guests; the other mood of his insanity was a separate dark cell, whither his heart never entered. His despair was the tyranny of a diseased reason; a compulsion, unnatural and strange, upon his whole being; but his devout thoughts, his religious feelings, his submission to God's will, his social sympathies, enjoyments, disinterestedness, affectionate and sweet temper, were the habit of his disposition, his character, his nature. Hence, in one of his letters to his friend Unwin, he says that he never wrote anything at second hand in his life; all the web and woof of his poetry

was out of his own experience, what he had himself thought, felt, believed, meditated, suffered, enjoyed ; all native, all original. In reference to his first poetical volume, he said to the same friend, " I know there is in the book that wisdom which cometh from above, because it was from above that I received it. May they receive it too ! For whether they drink it out of the cistern, or whether it falls upon them immediately from the clouds, as it did on me, it is all one. It is the water of life, which whosoever drinketh shall thirst no more."

Perhaps it may be set down as a ruling distinction between imaginary and real despair, that whereas the first may co-exist with seasons of much cheerfulness, and march together sometimes with Laughter holding both his sides, the latter can never admit a sportive humour, or give way to the influence of playfulness or wit, though it come in the most irresistible form ever put on by innocent and harmless gaiety. Bunyan has drawn a picture of the Man of Despair, whose soul you would no more dream of enlivening with a sunbeam, or winning to the beauty of a smile by merriment or jest, than of beguiling the anguish of the lost by the harp of David. But in Cowper's mind, Despair and Wit, Melancholy and delightful Humour, went hand in hand, weeping and laughing at each other. In one and the same letter he would write such a description of his gloom and anguish, as would make the reader weep with sympathy, or stand in solemn awe, profoundly wondering, as before God's most inscrutable judgments ; and before the close, he would give you a thought, an incident, a sentence, or a melody, of such exquisite and sportive pleasantry, that the sight is more

original and lovely than that of the fragrant flowers that hang blossoming and smiling on the edge of a glacier. Thus the two halves of the same letter seem sometimes the presence or the likeness of two separate beings.

In one of his striking letters to Newton he says, "You complain of that crowd of trifling thoughts that pester you without ceasing; but then you always have a serious thought standing at the door of your imagination, like a justice of peace with the riot-act in his hand, ready to read it and disperse the mob. Here lies the difference between you and me. My thoughts are clad in a sober livery, for the most part as grave as that of a bishop's servants. They turn too upon spiritual subjects, but the tallest fellow, and the loudest among them all, is he who is continually crying, with a loud voice, *Actum est de te; peristi.*" This same letter he concludes with a series of sportive rhymes by way of a message to Mrs Newton in regard to some proposed domestic purchases.

"Cocoa-nut naught,
Fish too dear,
None must be bought
For us that are here.
No lobster on earth,
That ever I saw,
To me would be worth
Sixpence a claw.
So dear madam wait
Till fish can be got
At a reasonable rate,
Whether lobster or not.
Till the French and the Dutch
Have quitted the seas,
And then send as much,
And as oft as you please."

And yet, in another letter to Newton he says, "I

wonder that a sportive thought should ever knock at the door of my intellect, and still more that it should gain admittance. It is as if a harlequin should intrude himself into the gloomy chamber where a corpse is deposited in state. His antic gesticulations would be unseasonable at any rate, but more especially so if they should distort the features of the mournful attendants into laughter. But the mind, long wearied with the sameness of a dull, dreary prospect, will gladly fix its eyes on anything that may make a little variety in its contemplations, though it were but a kitten playing with her tail."

But here it is to be remarked that in fact what renders the humour of Cowper so delightful is, that it is neither forced nor boisterous, neither put on for effect nor resorted to for provoking laughter either in himself or others; but it is manifestly a native permeating element, from a deep living salient spring in his being; a vein running through the whole empire of his mind and heart, like a brook in green pastures. The sportive flashes of his wit are as native, genuine, and playful, as artless and unpremeditated, as the serenest expressions of his piety are sincere, profound, and thoughtful; and both are as spontaneous as the rich droppings of a full honey-comb. The playfulness of Cowper, not being assumed, but really omnipresent and irresistible, had a native sweetness and power that, except in the intervals of real, despotic, overwhelming insanity, gained the victory over his gloom; nor was he at any time so utterly miserable as he conceived himself to be.

Meantime, the lessons of his affliction were never forgotten by him; he felt deeply his dependence upon God for every breath of his genius. There was this difference,

he said, between the generality of poets and himself—"they have been ignorant how much they stood indebted to an Almighty power for the exercise of those talents they have supposed their own; whereas I know, and know most perfectly, and am, perhaps, to be taught it to the last, that my power to think, whatever it be, and consequently my power to compose, is as much as my outward power afforded to me by the same hand that makes me in any respect to differ from a brute. This lesson, if not constantly inculcated, might, perhaps, be forgotten, or at least too slightly remembered."

Thus it was that Cowper never wrote with weariness, never but with pleasure, never except spontaneously; and this was a great source and secret of his success. He said himself that there were times when he was no more of a poet than he was a mathematician, but at other times it seemed as easy for him to pour forth the sweetest thoughts and feelings, in the sweetest, simplest style, as for a child to breathe. He once said to his friend Unwin, as also to Lady Hesketh, that he was so formed as to be, in regard to pleasure and pain, in extremes; whatever gave him *any* pleasure gave him *much*; and he enjoyed much in the work of composition. It was an amusement that carried him away from himself; or rather it transported him from his gloomy self to his radiant and hopeful self under the light of heaven; from the experience of an imagined despair to that region of heavenly experience taught of God, amid thoughts of the richest wisdom, and feelings kindling with the theme; emotions grateful, devout, affectionate, crowding forth from the opened doors of that life hid with Christ in God, before which, at other times,

despair kept such gloomy and forbidding watch, that there was no access to it, no communion with it. The labour of his authorship on heavenly themes was as the work of those who, passing through the Valley of Baca, make it a well ; it was like Isaac's labour in digging the wells which the Philistines in their malignity had filled and sealed up with dirt and stones ; and in its happy result to himself it was as a hand Divine reached down to draw him up from an abyss of wretchedness. "The quieting and composing effect of it," he told Newton, "was such, and so totally absorbed have I sometimes been in my rhyming occupation, that neither the past nor the future (those themes which to me are so fruitful in regret at other times) had any longer a share in my contemplation."

This was just because, in meditating on these sweet celestial themes, he had retreated from the mob of accusing and despairing tumultuous thoughts into that holy of holies, where his life was in a double sense hid with Christ in God. He stole away gradually, by such delightful occupation, from his own despair, and the Enemy found there was one secret recess which he could not enter, one pavilion where God could hide the troubled wanderer from the strife of tongues.

CHAPTER XX.

Tenor of Cowper's life and employments—The idle and the busy man—
Translation of Homer—His account of this work to Newton.

IN the year 1786, Cowper wrote to Lady Hesketh, in reference to his mental malady, a letter descriptive of the same, from which we have already quoted some passages. "It will be thirteen years in little more than a week," said he, "since this malady seized me. Methinks I hear you ask—your affection for me will, I know, make you wish to do so—'Is it removed?' I reply, In great measure, but not quite. Occasionally I am much distressed, but that distress becomes continually less frequent, and I think less violent." "In the year when I wrote 'The Task'—for it occupied me about a year—I was very often most supremely unhappy ; and am, under God, indebted in a good part to that work for not having been much worse." This was written in January, a month the recurrence of which Cowper always dreaded, for it was in that month that his tremendous malady had seized him, and he feared its periodical return. But the style of this letter shews how cheerfully he could speak of his malady when he exerted himself to view it and describe it from the bright side.

Cowper here says that while writing "The Task" he

was often supremely unhappy ; it was a period in which he was threatened with a second recurrence of his malady in all its force, and he suffered indescribably from dejection of spirits. Yet let us look from another point of view, and that Cowper's own point, chosen by himself in his poem, upon the tenor of his life and employments, and we shall see the same supremely unhappy person happier than thousands whom the world call happy ; and even in his own conscious estimation not unfavoured of his God, nor without deep and constant enjoyment.

“ How various his employments whom the world
Calls idle ; and who justly in return
Esteems that busy world an idler too !
Friends, books, a garden, and perhaps his pen,
Delightful industry enjoy'd at home,
And Nature in her cultivated trim
Dress'd to his taste, inviting him abroad—
Can he want occupation, who has these ?
Will he be idle, who has much to enjoy ?
Me, therefore, studious of laborious ease,
Not slothful, happy to deceive the time,
Not waste it, and aware that human life
Is but a loan to be repaid with use,
When He shall call His debtors to account,
From whom are all our blessings, business finds
E'en here ; while sedulous I seek to improve,
At least neglect not, or leave unemploy'd,
The mind He gave me ; driving it, though slack,
Too oft, and much impeded in its work,
By causes not to be divulged in vain,
To its just point, the service of mankind.
He that attends to his interior self,
That has a heart, and keeps it ; has a mind
That hungers, and supplies it ; and who seeks
A social, not a dissipated life,
Has business ; feels himself engaged to achieve
No unimportant, though a silent task.
A life all turbulence and noise may seem
To him that leads it, wise, and to be praised ;

But wisdom is a pearl with most success
Sought in still waters and beneath clear skies.
He that is ever occupied in storms,
Or dives not for it, or brings up instead,
Vainly industrious, a disgraceful prize."

Now, this and similar passages are truly descriptive of Cowper's own character and pursuits ; and while beguiled by such tastes and employments from the work of brooding over his own despondency, he was by no means so unhappy as he sometimes seems in his letters. "My descriptions," says he, "are all from nature; not one of them second-handed. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience; not one of them borrowed from books, or in the least degree conjectured."

Now, the possessor of such an experience as Cowper frequently delineates cannot be called unhappy, whatever local, or occasional, or even perpetual causes of dejection may weigh upon the spirits. The pleasure of employment, after the publication of "The Task," was speedily transferred to the translation of Homer's "Iliad." This was what Cowper himself called a herculean labour, but he felt himself providentially called to it, and went through it with astonishing perseverance and ease. He began it the 12th of November 1784. Writing in regard to it to Newton, he says, "For some weeks after I had finished 'The Task,' and sent away the last sheet corrected, I was, through necessity, idle, and suffered not a little in my spirits for being so. One day, being in such distress of mind as was hardly supportable, I took up the 'Iliad,' and merely to divert attention, and with no more preconception of what I was then entering upon than I have at this moment of what I shall be doing these twenty years hence, translated

the first twelve lines of it. The same necessity pressing me again, I had recourse to the same expedient, and translated more. Every day bringing its occasion for employment with it, every day consequently added something to the work; till at last I began to reflect thus: The 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' together consist of about forty thousand verses. To translate these forty thousand verses will furnish me with occupation for a considerable time. I have already made some progress; and I find it a most agreeable amusement." He set himself forty lines a day as his work, for a constancy, translating in the morning and transcribing in the evening. Sometimes he was very happy. "Wonder with me, my beloved cousin," he writes, in a letter to Lady Hesketh, "at the goodness of God, who, according to Dr Watts' beautiful stanza—

" ' Can clear the darkest skies,
Can give us day for night,
Make drops of sacred sorrow rise
To rivers of delight.' "

As I said once before, so say I again, my heart is as light as a bird on the subject of Homer. Neither without prayer nor without confidence in the providential goodness of God, has that work been undertaken or continued. I am not so dim-sighted, sad as my spirit is at times, but that I can plainly discern His providence going before me in the way. Unforeseen, unhopd-for advantages have sprung at His bidding, and a prospect, at first cloudy indeed, and discouraging enough, has been continually brightening." He had told Newton before, that he "had not entered on this work, unconnected as it must needs appear with the interests of the cause of God, without the

direction of His providence, nor altogether unassisted by Him in the performance of it. Time will shew to what it ultimately tends. I am inclined to believe that it has a tendency, to which I myself am, at present, perfectly a stranger. Be that as it may, He knows my frame, and will consider that I am but dust."

About this time he received from his friend Mr Newton his new work on the "Messiah," the acknowledgment of which was the occasion of a letter from Cowper, that reveals more of the depths of his spiritual distresses than almost any other passage in his writings. He told Newton that Adam's own approach to the Tree of Life, after he had sinned, was not more effectually prohibited by the flaming sword, that turned every way, than his to its great Antitype (the Lord Jesus) had been for almost thirteen years, a short interval of three or four days, about a twelvemonth before, alone excepted. "For what reason it is that I am thus long excluded, if I am ever again to be admitted, is known to God only. I can say but this, that if He is still my Father, His paternal severity has, toward me, been such that I have reason to account it unexampled. For though others have suffered desertion, yet few, I believe, for so long a time, and perhaps none a desertion accompanied with such experiences. But they have this belonging to them, that, as they are not fit for recital, being made up merely of infernal ingredients, so neither are they susceptible of it; for I know no language in which they could be expressed. They are as truly things which it is not possible for man to utter, as those were which Paul heard and saw in the third heaven. If the ladder of Christian experience reaches, as I suppose it

does, to the very presence of God, it has nevertheless its foot in the abyss. And if Paul stood, as no doubt he did, in that experience of his to which I have just alluded, on the topmost round of it, I have been standing, and still stand, on the lowest, in this thirteenth year that has passed since I descended. In such a situation of mind, encompassed by the midnight of absolute despair, and a thousand times filled with unspeakable horror, I first commenced as an author. Distress drove me to it, and the impossibility of subsisting without some employment still recommends it.

“ I am not, indeed, so perfectly hopeless as I was, but I am equally in need of an occupation, being often as much and sometimes even more worried than ever. I cannot amuse myself, as I once could, with carpenters’ or with gardeners’ tools, or with squirrels and guinea-pigs. At that time I was a child. But since it has pleased God, whatever else He withholds, to restore to me a man’s mind, I have put away childish things. Thus far, therefore, it is plain, that I have not chosen or prescribed to myself my own way, but have been providentially led to it ; perhaps I might say with equal propriety compelled and scourged into it ; for certainly, could I have made my choice, or were I permitted to make it even now, those hours which I spend in poetry, I would spend with God. But it is evidently His will that I should spend them as I do, because every other way of employing them He himself continues to make impossible. If in the course of such an occupation, or by inevitable consequence of it, either my former connexions are revived, or new ones occur, these things are as much a part of the dispensation

as the leading points of it themselves. If His purposes in thus directing me are gracious, He will take care to prove them such in the issue, and in the meantime will preserve me (for He is as able to do that in one condition of life as another) from all mistakes in conduct that might prove pernicious to myself, or give reasonable offence to others. I can say it as truly as ever it was spoken, 'Here I am ; let Him do with me as seemeth Him good.'"

Again, at a date not far from the other, 1785, he remarks in a similar strain, "Of myself, who once had both leaves and fruit, but who now have neither, I say nothing, or only this, that when I am overwhelmed with despair, I repine at my barrenness, and think it hard to be thus blighted ; but when a glimpse of hope breaks in upon me, I am contented to be the sapless thing I am, knowing that He who has commanded me to wither, can command me to flourish again when he pleases. My experiences, however, of this latter kind, are rare and transient. The light that reaches me cannot be compared either to that of the sun or of the moon. It is a flash in a dark night, during which the heavens seem opened only to shut again."

It might be supposed, if this letter were the whole ground of our judgment, that at this time Cowper was supremely miserable ; but there are other letters, close upon the same date, and some to Newton himself, shewing that it was far otherwise. He was greatly animated and cheered just then by the prospect of a visit from his beloved and accomplished cousin, Lady Hesketh ; and he told her that he believed it would be a cordial to his nervous system. "Joy of heart," said he, "from whatever occasion it may arise, is the best of all nervous medi-

cines; and I should not wonder if such a turn given to my spirits should have even a lasting effect of the most advantageous kind upon them. You must not imagine, neither, that I am on the whole in any great degree subject to nervous affections. Occasionally I am, and have been these many years, much liable to dejection; but at intervals, and sometimes for an interval of weeks, no creature would suspect it. For I have not that which commonly is a symptom of such a case belonging to me—I mean extraordinary elevation in the absence of the blue devil. When I am in the best health, my tide of animal sprightliness flows with great equality, so that I am never at any time exalted in proportion as I am sometimes depressed. My depression has a cause, and if that cause were to cease I should be as cheerful thenceforth, and perhaps for ever, as any man need be.”

He also wrote to Newton, after Lady Hesketh's arrival, that he felt himself “well content to say, without any enlargement on the subject, that an inquirer after happiness might travel far, and not find a happier trio than meet every day either in our parlour or in the parlour of the vicarage.” It was in the vicarage that Lady Hesketh had taken up her residence; and in her parlour the trio, so happy and so pleasant, met every other day. “I will not say,” he continues, “that my part of the happiness is not occasionally somewhat dashed with the sable hue of those notions concerning myself and my situation that have occupied, or rather possessed me so long; but, on the other hand, I can also affirm that my cousin's affectionate behaviour to us both, the sweetness of her temper, and

the sprightliness of her conversation, relieve me in no small degree from the presence of them."

It was much that Cowper could bring himself to speak at this time of the forms of his spiritual despondency as notions. It was not always from such a point of view, or in such a light, that he was enabled to regard them. They tyrannised over his mind, so that he dared not look them in the face, and contradict or question them. They possessed him with such a morbid dread and helplessness, that he felt in their presence somewhat as he used to do, when, a little, timid, trembling boy at school, he dared look no higher than the shoe-buckles of the older tyrants. At times they closed upon him in grim reality. "Yesterday was one of my terrible seasons. The grinners at 'John Gilpin' little dream what the author sometimes suffers." When again he entered into the cloud, it was no longer a notion.

Speaking of the old dwelling at Olney, after they had left it, "Never," says he, "did I see so forlorn and woful a spectacle. Deserted of its inhabitants, it seemed as if it could never be dwelt in for ever. The coldness of it, the dreariness, and the dirt, made me think it no unapt resemblance of a soul that God has forsaken. While He dwelt in it, and manifested Himself there, He could create His own accommodations, and give it occasionally the appearance of a palace; but the moment He withdraws, and takes with Him all the furniture and embellishment of His graces, it becomes what it was before he entered it—the habitation of vermin and the image of desolation. Sometimes I envy the living, but not much, or not long;

for while they live, as we call it, they, too, are liable to desertion. But the dead who have died in the Lord, I envy always ; for they, I take it for granted, can be no more forsaken." In Cowper's earlier poem of "Retirement," there is presented a picture of the melancholy patient of "virtuous and faithful Heberden," who was Cowper's physician in his first attack of madness ; a picture of himself, affectinglly true to the life, when under the power of his dreadful and unsearchable malady.

"Look where he comes ! in this embower'd alcove
Stand close conceal'd, and see a statue move :
Lips busy, and eyes fix'd, foot falling slow,
Arms hanging idly down, hands clasp'd below,
Interpret to the marking eye distress,
Such as its symptoms can alone express.
That tongue is silent now ; that silent tongue
Could argue once, could jest, or join the song.
Could give advice, could censure or commend,
Or charm the sorrows of a drooping friend.
Renounced alike its office and its sport,
Its brisker and its graver strains fall short ;
Both fail beneath a fever's secret sway,
And like a summer brook are pass'd away.
This is a sight for pity to peruse,
Till she resemble faintly what she views ;
Till sympathy contract a kindred pain,
Pierced with the woes that she laments in vain.
This, of all maladies that man infest,
Claims most compassion, and receives the least.
Job felt it, when he groan'd beneath the rod,
And the barb'd arrows of a frowning God ;
And such emollients as his friends could spare,
Friends such as his for modern Jobs prepare.

"Man is a harp, whose chords elude the sight,
Each yielding harmony, disposed aright ;
The screws reversed (a task which, if He please,
God in a moment executes with ease)
Ten thousand thousand strings at once go loose,
Lost, till He tune them, all their power and use.

Then neither heathy wilds, nor scenes as fair
 As ever recompensed the peasant's care,
 Nor soft declivities with tufted hills,
 Nor view of waters turning busy mills,
 Parks in which Art Preceptress Nature weds,
 Nor gardens interspersed with flowery beds,
 Nor gales that catch the scent of blooming groves,
 And waft it to the mourner as he roves,
 Can call up life into his faded eye,
 That passes all he sees unheeded by.
 No wounds like those a wounded spirit feels,
 No cure for such, till God, who makes them, heals.

"And thou, sad sufferer under nameless ill,
 That yields not to the touch of human skill,
 Improve the kind occasion, understand
 A Father's frown, and kiss His chastening hand.
 To thee the day-spring and the blaze of noon,
 The purple evening and resplendent moon,
 The stars that, sprinkled o'er the vault of night,
 Seem drops descending in a shower of light,
 Shine not, or undesired and hated shine,
 Seen through the medium of a cloud like thine;
 Yet seek Him, in His favour life is found,
 All bliss beside a shadow or a sound;
 Then heaven eclipsed so long, and this dull earth
 Shall seem to start into a second birth.
 Nature, assuming a more lovely face,
 Borrowing a beauty from the works of grace,
 Shall be despised and overlook'd no more,
 Shall fill thee with delights unfelt before,
 Impart to things inanimate a voice,
 And bid her mountains and her hills rejoice.
 The sound shall run along the winding vales,
 And thou enjoy an Eden ere it fails."

Both the gloom and the gladness of this picture were drawn from Cowper's own profound experience; he had known the screws reversed, the chords jarring in conflict and chaos; and he had known the harp tuned again by the Maker, and yielding a celestial melody. He had known the wounded spirit, and the heavenly cure. No poet on earth ever descended into such depths, and came

forth again from them, to sing on earth strains so resembling those that employ the happy spirits in heaven. If the desire of Satan, to have and to sift as wheat those whom he sees most likely to make a breach in his kingdom, were always attended with a result so mortifying, one would think he must, ere this, have changed his mode of tactics. And, indeed, in spiritual as well as temporal things, it may be said—

“That Satan now’s grown wiser than of yore,
And tempts by making rich, not making poor.”

If he can make any one *say*, “I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,” he is very near the accomplishment of his purposes; but very far from it while he merely succeeds in keeping the soul troubled, distressed, and self-despairing.

CHAPTER XXI.

Cowper's happy experience—His religious enjoyment of nature—Genius and humility—Danger and discipline—Self-knowledge in the furnace—Malady in 1787.

It was with an eye and heart thus blissfully enlightened that Cowper had been taught to look upon Nature ; and inasmuch as he has told us that, both in his delineations of Nature and of the human heart, he had drawn all from experience, and nothing from second-hand, we can not but personify the author when we read those exquisite passages in "The Task" descriptive of the filial delight with which the Christian child and freeman looks forth upon the works of God. The poet that could write, out of his own experience, the close of the fifth book of "The Task," "The Winter Morning Walk," and that of the sixth book also, "The Winter Walk at Noon," must himself have been the happy man, appropriating Nature as his Father's work, must himself have felt the dear, filial relationship, the assurance of a Father's love, and of a child's inheritance in heaven. Notwithstanding the cloudy, fathomless, despairing deeps through which his soul, much of the time, had to struggle, yet it was he himself that felt compelled to exclaim, when gazing forth

into the blue abyss upon those starry hosts that navigate
a sea that knows no storms, My Father made them all !

" His soul,
Much conversant with heaven, did often hold,
With those fair ministers of light to man
That fill the skies nightly with silent pomp,
Sweet conference."

There was a morbid, brooding obstinacy in his mental malady, a sullen and inveterate self-tormenting ingenuity of argument, and perverseness of conclusion against himself, that held him for a while, held him habitually, while he listened to himself ; but sometimes the spell was broken, oftener, indeed, than his black-browed accusers suffered him to admit, and he enjoyed with his whole heart the opening heavens, and received sweet earnest of the presence of his God.

" With animated hopes my soul beholds,
And many an aching wish, your beamy fires,
That shew like beacons in the blue abyss,
Ordain'd to guide the embodied spirit home
From toilsome life to never-ending rest.
Love kindles as I gaze. I feel desires
That give assurance of their own success,
And that, infused from heaven, must thither tend."

It must have been in the deep consciousness of communion with his Maker, in the profound experience of gratitude, and faith, and love, that he wrote those closing lines of the fifth book of "The Task." He may have had to go down from the mount immediately afterward, to converse with suffering and gloom ; but he was on the mount then, a mount of transfiguration, and the Lord of Nature and of Grace was there, communing with him.

" A voice is heard that mortal ears hear not,
Till Thou hast touch'd them ; 'tis the voice of song,

A loud hosanna sent from all Thy works ;
 Which he that hears it with a shout repeats,
 And adds his rapture to the general praise.
 In that bless'd moment, Nature throwing wide
 Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile
 The Author of her beauties, who, retired
 Behind His own creation, works unseen
 By the impure, and hears His power denied.
 Thou art the source and centre of all minds,
 Thou only point of rest, Eternal Word !
 From Thee departing, they are lost, and rove
 At random, without honour, hope, or peace.
 From Thee is all that soothes the life of man,
 His high endeavour and his glad success,
 His strength to suffer and his will to serve.
 But, O Thou bounteous Giver of all good !
 Thou art of all Thy gifts Thyself the Crown !
 Give what Thou canst, without Thee we are poor,
 And with Thee rich, take what Thou wilt away !"

One may say with perfect truth, that if all Cowper's sufferings had taught, or enabled him to write, only those two last lines; yet, teaching him that, as his own deep experience, they were well endured, they were infinitely precious. Nevertheless, hidden so often and so long from the enjoyment of the light he was the means of communicating to others, Cowper's case is a most extraordinary illustration of the grand poetical aphorism—

"Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
 Not light them for themselves."

God will so "seal instruction," according to that wondrous revelation of the manner of His dealings with those whom He means to save, in the thirty-third chapter of the Book of Job, as to "hide pride from man." He will seal His most precious gifts with the great seal of humility. He did so with Cowper. The possession and exercise of

such surpassing powers of genius would have been dangerous and self-pernicious otherwise.

And therefore perhaps it was, that not till he was fifty years of age, and not till he had passed through a baptism of such suffering in the valley of the shadow of death as few men upon earth have encountered, did God permit the genius of Cowper to unfold itself, and the tide of inevitable praise to set in upon him. And even then He so disciplined Cowper, as to make him feel as if that very genius were rather an external angel, commissioned of God to help him through his sufferings, than an inward self-possession, which he could command and exercise at will. He was naturally ambitious of distinction—what fallen mortal ever was not?—and in any period of elevation, when the load of his misery was lightened and his health and spirits rose, he found, and felt, and acknowledged this tendency, this passion, and knew that he needed God's chastising hand. And yet, at the same time, when in the depths of spiritual distress, he felt as though the very last dregs of that passion had been wrung out from him, as though the applauses of a world could not affect him, as though the arch-enemy himself could never again touch him with that dart.

There are two extraordinary letters written, the one to his friend Newton, the other to Lady Hesketh, both of surpassing interest, but still more deeply interesting when compared; written in different states of mind, yet at times very near each other; which shew at once how deeply he had been made to understand himself, and yet how much less he knew of himself than God knew for him; how clearly in the abyss he could see the darkness, yet how soon

upon the mount he might become insensible to the danger. "God knows," he said to Newton in 1785, "that my mind having been occupied more than twelve years in the contemplation of the most distressing subjects, the world, and its opinion of what I write, is become as unimportant to me as the whistling of a bird in a bush." If the world did not approve him, he thought that would not trouble him. "And as to their commendations, if I should chance to win them, I feel myself equally invulnerable there. The view that I have had of myself for many years has been so truly humiliating, that I think the praises of all mankind could not hurt me. God knows that I speak my present sense of the matter at least most truly, when I say that the admiration of creatures like myself seems to me a weapon the least dangerous that my worst enemy could employ against me. I am fortified against it by such solidity of real self-abasement, that I deceive myself most egregiously if I do not heartily despise it. Praise belongeth to God; and I seem to myself to covet it no more than I covet Divine honours. Could I assuredly hope that God would at last deliver me, I should have reason to thank Him for all that I have suffered, were it only for the sake of this single fruit of my affliction, that it has taught me how much more contemptible I am in myself than I ever before suspected, and has reduced my former share of self-knowledge (of which at that time I had a tolerably good opinion) to a mere nullity in comparison with what I have acquired since.

"Self is a subject of inscrutable misery and mischief, and can never be studied to so much advantage as in the dark; for as the bright beams of the sun seem to impart

a beauty to the foulest objects, and can make even a dunghill smile, so the light of God's countenance, vouchsafed to a fallen creature, so sweetens him and softens him for the time, that he seems both to others and himself to have nothing savage or sordid about him. But the heart is a nest of serpents, and will be such while it continues to beat. If God cover the mouth of that nest with His hand, they are hush and snug ; but if He withdraw His hand, the whole family lift up their heads and hiss, and are as active and venomous as ever. This I always professed to believe from the time that I had embraced the truth, but never knew it as I do now."

Here is deep self-knowledge, and yet the ground and possibility of self-forgetfulness and self-deception. Dear, afflicted friend, (Newton might have written to him,) may God keep you in his hand, safe from the treacherous praises of the world, till He take the whole brood and family of serpents out of your heart ; for till He does that with us, then only are we safe ; and meanwhile He will *burn* them out, with our hearts in the hottest crucible, if there be no other way. But beware of Peter's word, nor confidently say, even in regard to what seems now so worthless to you as human applause, It can never hurt me, but grant it never may!

Nor was even Cowper, with all his tremendous gloom and mental suffering, yet out of danger. The letter to Lady Hesketh is a frank, sincere avowal, in an interval of brighter spirits, of the ardent thirst for fame which he knew to be in him ; but it seems clear that in the light it did not appear quite so glaringly to be one of the brood of serpents, hush and snug, as it had done in the dark.

"I am not ashamed," he says to his beloved cousin, "to confess that, having commenced an author, I am most abundantly desirous to succeed as such. I have (what, perhaps, you little suspect me of) in my nature an infinite share of ambition. But with it I have at the same time, as you well know, an equal share of diffidence. To this combination of opposite qualities it has been owing, that till lately I stole through life without undertaking anything, yet always wishing to distinguish myself. At last I ventured, ventured too in the only path that, at so late a period, was yet open to me; and am determined, if God have not determined otherwise, to work my way through the obscurity that has been so long my portion, into notice. Every thing, therefore, that seems to threaten this my favourite purpose with disappointment, affects me nearly. I suppose that all ambitious minds are in the same predicament. He who seeks distinction must be sensible of disappointment exactly in the same proportion as he desires applause.

"And now, my precious cousin, I have unfolded my heart to you in this particular without a speck of dissimulation. Some people, and good people, too, would blame me. But you will not; and they, I think, would blame without just cause. We certainly do not honour God when we bury, or when we neglect to improve, as far as we may, whatever of talent He may have bestowed upon us, whether it be little or much. In natural things as well as in spiritual, it is a never-failing truth that to him who hath, that is, to him who occupies what he hath diligently, and so as to increase it, more shall be given. Set me down, therefore, my dear, for an industrious

rhymers, so long as I shall have the ability. For in this only way is it possible for me, so far as I can see, either to honour God or to serve man, or even to serve myself."

But God, in Cowper's case, would "hide pride from man." He still kept him in the furnace, and again and again permitted all the waves and billows of an almost infernal despair to go over him. In 1787, in the dreaded month of January, in the midst of his labours on *Homer*, a severe access of his malady prostrated him so completely, that for six months he could not put pen to paper. The attack, he afterward told Newton, could not be of a worse kind. It was foreboded by a nervous fever, which he told Lady Hesketh was attended with much dejection, and kept him during a whole week almost sleepless. During this season of almost madness, the sight of any face except Mrs Unwin's was to him an insupportable grievance; even Newton could not see him; and indeed during the whole time his mind was labouring under a disbelief of Newton's personal identity, with a conviction that for thirteen years he had been corresponding with him as a friend, under the disagreeable suspicion all the while of his being not a friend, but a stranger. "Never was the mind of man," said he, in his first letter to Newton announcing his recovery, "benighted to the degree that mine has been. The storms that have assailed me would have upset the faith of every man that ever had any; and the very remembrance of them, even after they have been long passed by, makes hope impossible." From this dreadful condition of mind he says that he emerged suddenly, without the slightest previous notice of the change, and how long it might last

they were wholly uncertain. However, he soon resumed his correspondence and his literary labours, and his health and spirits continued for a season to improve.

There were occasions on which Cowper evidently felt himself entirely free from any disorder, a man, by the blessing of God, perfectly well, both inwardly and outwardly. For example, he writes to his young friend and kinsman Johnson, under date of 1791, and speaks of the disorder of his spirits, to which he has been all his life subject. "At present," says he, "thank God, I am perfectly well, both in mind and body."

Again, in the same year, in a letter to Mrs King, he says, after speaking of his insupportable melancholy, "This is the first day of my complete recovery, the first in which I have perceived no symptoms of my terrible malady."

But such delightful seasons of freedom from gloom were transitory; the malady resumed its reign; and he told Mrs King that in the depths of it he wrote "The Task," and the volume that preceded it; "and in the same deeps I am now translating Homer." The industry, resolution, and perseverance which it required to struggle on through such a work, under such discouragements, were by themselves evidences of a very powerful mind, not at all unbalanced or weakened by the oppressive burden even of despair. The work compelled him to the utmost closeness of application. In one of his letters to Mrs King he curiously discloses the perpetual labour, whether at home or abroad, in which it had involved him. There was not a scrap of paper belonging to him that was not scribbled over with blank verse, and on taking her letter from a

bundle to answer it, he found it inscribed with scraps of Homer. He quoted the lines, and told her that when he wrote them he was rambling at a considerable distance from home. Setting one foot on a mole-hill, and placing his hat, with the crown upward, on his knee for a writing-desk, he laid her letter upon it, and with his pencil scribbled the fragment that he might not forget it. In this way he had written many and many a passage of the work, and carried it home to be incorporated in the translation.

During these years, most unfortunately thus hampered with this great undertaking, he might have written many original poems, for he was often in the mood for it, but his appointed task would not permit it; he could not take the time. In one of his letters to Lady Hesketh he gave her a ludicrous heroic comparison, after the manner of Homer, to account for his producing so few occasional poems, and for his withholding the very few that he did produce. "A thought sometimes strikes me before I rise; if it runs readily into verse, and I can finish it before breakfast, it is well, otherwise it dies and is forgotten; for all the subsequent hours are devoted to Homer. Fine things, indeed, I have few. He who has Homer to transcribe may well be contented to do little else. As when an ass, being harnessed with ropes to a hand-cart, drags with hanging ears his heavy burden, neither filling the long-echoing streets with his harmonious bray, nor throwing up his heels behind, frolicsome and airy, as asses less engaged are wont to do; so I, satisfied to find myself indispensably obliged to render into the best possible English meter eight-and-forty Greek books, of which the

two finest poems in the world consist, account it quite sufficient if I may at last achieve that labour, and seldom allow myself those pretty little vagaries in which I should otherwise delight, and of which, if I should live long enough, I intend hereafter to enjoy my fill."

Cowper's fragmentary poem on "Yardley Oak," and that on the "Four Ages," are examples of what he might have produced, had leisure and serenity of mind been vouchsafed—indeed we may say, had his time been at his own disposal, even amid all the anxiety and distress that by day and by night had become the habit of his being. But the sounds of despair, to which he appeared to be perpetually listening, seemed not in the least to interfere with the play of his original inventive and suggestive faculty of genius. They no more prevented the vigorous exercise of thought and imagination in their richest moods, than the thunder of the cataract of Niagara hinders the pine forests from waving or the flowers from blossoming, or withholds the birds from their melodies, or the grass from its greenness. Nay, the pressure of despondency and gloom seemed to give a solemn grandeur and compactness to his trains of thought; and those fragments to which we have referred stand like majestic Propylæums, behind which there is found indeed no temple, but which irresistibly impress the spectator with the sublimity and vastness of the conception that must have filled the mind of the architect. The "Four Ages," judging from the beginning, would have been a still sublimer and more profound poem than "The Task." Something of the same grand train of thought seems to have been commenced as in "Yardley Oak," but it breaks off just at the commence-

ment, just merely when the impression is left of a mighty and glorious region before you, through which you are to be conveyed, but as in a dream the power quits you, and you fall and wake. Or, as when you have been carried to the summit of a mountain, and suddenly, instead of the disclosure of a glorious, illimitable landscape, an impenetrable ocean of mist is rolling before you.

There must have been a consciousness of these powers in Cowper's mind; he could not have begun such poems, and in such a manner begun them, without the vivid feeling of what he could accomplish, by the Divine blessing; and it must have been with a deeper feeling of sorrow and disappointment or constraint, than at any time he expresses, that he found himself compelled to turn away from such delightful and exciting visions to the drudgery of the translator and the commentator. And yet, there were no longings of disappointed ambition; there was now nothing but sad humility and patience, and a mournful longing after God. Most affectingly does he refer to his condition of supposed banishment from the Divine favour; and the mournful grief and desolation of his spirit under it were a precious and convincing proof to others, though not to himself, that God was with him, and that, wake when he might out of this dream of darkness, he should find himself satisfied with God's likeness in a world of light. Cowper's yearnings after God, and his patience and submission to the Divine will, were proofs of the light of life within him, though he felt it not. It is a most blessed promise, "He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Cowper always had *that*, and in the possession of it was ripening in holi-

ness and advancing toward heaven, even when he seemed to himself going down to the bottoms of the mountains, in a darkness deeper than Jonah's. "The weeds were wrapped about my head; the earth with her bars was about me for ever; my soul fainted within me." "God knows," exclaimed Cowper, "how much rather I would be the obscure tenant of a lath-and-plaster cottage, with a lively sense of my interest in a Redeemer, than the most admired object of public notice without it! Alas! what is a whole poem, even one of Homer's, compared with a single aspiration that finds its way immediately to God, though clothed in ordinary language, or perhaps not articulated at all!"

CHAPTER XXII.

Removal from Olney to Weston—Comparison of Cowper's feelings at different periods—Tenor of Southey's comments upon Cowper's experience and letters.

COWPER's removal from Olney to Weston, a neighbouring village much more delightful and agreeable, had taken place, happily, before this new attack. The change was brought about by the friendship and care of Lady Hesketh, who took a house at Weston, on the borders of the pleasure-grounds of Mr Throckmorton, and belonging to him; a charming situation, and much more healthful than their confined, damp, inconvenient habitation at Olney. Thither Cowper and the family removed; but they had no sooner become settled for a fortnight than a most severe affliction was laid upon them in the sudden illness and death of Cowper's dear friend and long and constant correspondent, Mrs Unwin's beloved son. The anguish to himself, and the sympathy in Mrs Unwin's sorrow, occasioned by this bereavement, which took place in November, may have had some effect in hastening the attack of his mental malady, the next January. The visit of Lady Hesketh had been to him a source of great animation and delight. The change of habitation which resulted from it was a lasting

benefit. Cowper himself thought that the nervous fever so oppressive to his spirits was much exasperated by the circumstances of his abode at Olney. He speaks of the atmosphere encumbered with raw vapours, issuing from flooded meadows; "and we in particular," says he, "perhaps have fared the worse for sitting so often, and sometimes for months, over a cellar filled with water. These ills we shall escape in the uplands, and, as we may reasonably hope, of course, their consequences. But as for happiness," says Cowper, "he that has once had communion with his Maker must be more frantic than ever I was yet, if he can dream of finding it at a distance from Him. I no more expect happiness at Weston than here, or than I should expect it in company with felons and outlaws in the hold of a ballast-lighter. Animal spirits, however, have their value, and are especially desirable to him who is condemned to carry a burden which at any rate will tire him, but which, without their aid, cannot fail to crush him."

"The dealings of God with me are to myself utterly unintelligible. I have never met, either in books or in conversation, with an experience at all similar to my own. More than a twelvemonth has passed since I began to hope that, having walked the whole breadth of the bottom of this Red Sea, I was beginning to climb the opposite shore, and I prepared to sing the song of Moses. But I have been disappointed; those hopes have been blasted; those comforts have been wrested from me. I could not be so duped, even by the Arch Enemy himself, as to be made to question the divine nature of them; but I have been made to believe (which you will say is being duped still more) that God gave them to me in derision, and took

them away in vengeance. Such, however, is and has been my persuasion many a long day, and when I shall think on that subject more comfortably, or, as you will be inclined to tell me, more rationally and scripturally, I know not."

Yet it is just about this time that Southey undertakes to say, on account of Cowper's enjoyment of the society of Lady Hesketh, and the tone of cheerfulness in his letters, and the absence of any marked religious strain, that Cowper was happier than he had ever been since the days of his youth! This contains a covert but studied depreciation of the brightness and blessedness of Cowper's life in the happy years of his early experience in Huntingdon and Olney, after his conversion. It reminds us of Southey's declaration that the period when Cowper was so absorbed in religious duties and employments, and enjoyed such close and uninterrupted communion with his God and Saviour, was "*preposterously* called the happy period of his life." Southey had also remarked, with a similar concealed reference, that the summer of 1781, when the poet, beneath the cloud of spiritual gloom, was engaged upon his first poetical volume, driven to that work, as he himself said, by mental anguish, was the happiest Cowper ever passed. Southey even intimated that the tenor of Cowper's religious life previously, so absorbed in devotional ideas and pursuits, had tended to bring back his madness, and was one exasperating cause of the access that ensued in 1773. He would persuade the reader that it was a perilous and injudicious thing in Newton to have engaged his friend in such a deeply interesting employment as the composition of the "Olney Hymns;" and he quotes the two affecting stanzas—

and— “Where is the blessedness I knew?”

“The peaceful hours I once enjoy’d,
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill,”

as a proof of the supposed danger of a return to madness!

Southey also declared, in reference to Cowper’s religious life with Newton, that “the course of life into which Cowper had been led at Olney, tended to alienate him from the friends whom he loved best.” In this sentence he referred partly to Lady Hesketh and her family, whose correspondence with Cowper had dropped, apparently because on Cowper’s part it was maintained almost solely on religious subjects. Southey says that the last letter Lady Hesketh received from Cowper, at that time, “was in a strain of that melancholy pietism which casts a gloom over everything, and which seems at once to chill the intellect and wither the affections.” That we may know what it is that Southey can sneer at as a melancholy pietism, and what it is that in his view casts a gloom over human life, and chills the intellect and withers the affections, we shall quote this interesting and admirable letter. It is dated January 30, 1767, and commences—

“MY DEAR LADY HESKETH,—I am glad you spent your summer in a place so agreeable to you. As to me, my lot is cast in a country where we have neither woods, nor commons, nor pleasant prospects; all is flat and insipid; in the summer adorned only with blue willows, and in the winter covered with a flood. Such it is at present: our bridges shaken almost in pieces; our poor willows torn

away by the roots, and our haycocks almost afloat. Yet even here we are happy; at least I am so; and if I have no groves with benches conveniently disposed, nor commons overgrown with thyme to regale me, neither do I want them. You thought to make my mouth water at the charms of Taplow, but you see you are disappointed.

“My dear cousin, I am a living man; and I can never reflect that I am so, without recollecting at the same time that I have infinite cause of thanksgiving and joy. This makes every place delightful to me where I can have leisure to meditate upon those mercies by which I live, and indulge a vein of gratitude to that gracious God who has snatched me like a brand out of the burning. Where had I been but for His forbearance and long-suffering?—even with those who shall never see His face in hope, to whom the name of Jesus, by a just judgment of God, is become a torment instead of a remedy. Thoughtless and inconsiderate wretch that I was! I lived as if I had been my own creator, and could continue my existence to what length and in what state I pleased; as if dissipation was the narrow way which leads to life, and a neglect of the blessed God would certainly end in the enjoyment of Him. But it pleased the Almighty to convince me of my fatal error before it indeed became such; to convince me that in communion with Him we may find that happiness for which we were created, and that a life without God in the world is a life of trash, and the most miserable delusion. Oh, how had my own corruptions and Satan together blinded and befooled me! I thought the service of my Maker and Redeemer a tedious and unnecessary labour; I despised those who thought otherwise; and if they spoke of the

love of God, I pronounced them madmen. As if it were possible to serve and love the Almighty being too much, with whom we must dwell for ever, or be for ever miserable without Him.

“Would I were the only one that had ever dreamed this dream of folly and wickedness ! but the world is filled with such, who furnish a continual proof of God’s almost unprovokable mercy ; who set up for themselves in a spirit of independence upon Him who made them, and yet enjoy that life by His bounty which they abuse to His dishonour. You remember me, my dear cousin, one of this trifling and deluded multitude. Great and grievous afflictions were applied to awaken me out of this deep sleep, and, under the influence of divine grace, have, I trust, produced the effect for which they were intended. If the way in which I had till that time proceeded had been according to the word and will of God, God had never interposed to change it. That He did is certain ; though others may not be so sensible of that interposition, yet I am sure of it. To think as I once did, therefore, must be wrong. Whether to think as I now do be right or not, is a question that can only be decided by the Word of God ; at least it is capable of no other decision till the Great Day determine it finally. I see, and see plainly, in every page and period of that Word, my former heedlessness and forgetfulness of God condemned. I see a life of union and communion with Him inculcated and enjoined as an essential requisite. To this, therefore, it must be the business of our lives to attain ; and happy is he who makes the greatest progress in it.

“This is no fable, but it is our life. If we stand at the

left hand of Christ while we live, we shall stand there too in the judgment. The separation must be begun in this world, which in that day shall be made for ever. My dear cousin, may the Son of God, who shall then assign to each his everlasting station, direct and settle all your thoughts upon this important subject! Whether you must think as I do, or not, is not the question; but it is indeed an awful question whether the Word of God be the rule of our actions, and His Spirit the principle by which we act. 'Search the Scriptures; for in them ye believe ye have eternal life.' This letter will be Mr Howe's companion to London. I wish his company were more worthy of him; but it is not fit it should be less. I pray God to bless you, and remember you where I never forget those I love.—Yours and Sir Thomas's affectionate friend,

“WM. COWPER.”

If this, in Southey's judgment, be “melancholy pietism,” what would be his imagination of sincere piety? It is melancholy to think that his own state of mind was such, that the genuine religion in this letter seemed to him to cover life with gloom, chilling the intellect and withering the affections! Here, Southey remarks, the correspondence with Lady Hesketh appears to have ceased; “he could take no pleasure at this time in any other strain, and she probably thought that it was dangerous for him to dwell constantly upon this.” Southey may have thought so himself, but we would charitably hope that Lady Hesketh did not. At this time Cowper's mind was acting in the clear light of heaven. Some sixteen years afterward the correspondence with Lady Hesketh was

renewed ; but Cowper's mind being then under the gloom of a religious despair, he could not write upon religious subjects as he had formerly done ; on the contrary, he speaks of his former zeal as having perhaps proved troublesome to her, and assures her that it was no longer his practice to force the subject of evangelical truth upon any. Southey calls this letter a confession of indiscreet zeal, and remarks that it shews what the change in Cowper's own religious views had been, noting with pleasure the altered tone, as giving satisfactory evidence of a saner and much more desirable state of mind. Lady Hesketh had written to Cowper, informing him that General Cowper himself was expecting to visit him, and, it would seem, had suggested some hints as to the propriety of avoiding any such religious conversation as might, in Southey's expression, occasion any uncomfortable feeling between them.

If Lady Hesketh had been aware how changed a being even a Christian must be, at the different poles of hope and despair, she would have had no fear of discomfort from the prevalence of religious and evangelical themes—so profoundly true is the conclusion involved in the prayer of David, "Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me by Thy free Spirit : then will I teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto Thee !" When Cowper possessed the joy of God's salvation, he could speak upon that theme, and it was the joy and the dictate of his heart to do so ; but he could not do it in gloom, he could not do it unless God opened his lips. "Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall shew forth Thy praise." In that gloomy and silent

state Cowper had now remained so many years, that it is not strange that his former freedom and faithfulness began to appear somewhat over-zealous in his own sight. Accordingly he said as much to Lady Hesketh, to take away all her anxiety about his being intrusive on the subject with General Cowper.

"As to the affair of religious conversation," said he, "fear me not lest I should trespass upon his peace in that way. Your views, my dear, upon the subject of a proper conduct in that particular are mine also. When I left St Albans, I left it under impressions of the existence of a God, and of the truth of Scripture, that I had never felt before. I had unspeakable delight in the discovery, and was impatient to communicate a pleasure to others that I found so superior to everything that bears the name. This eagerness of spirit, natural to persons newly informed, and the less to be wondered at in me, who had just emerged from the horrors of despair, made me imprudent, and I doubt not troublesome to many. Forgetting that I had not those blessings at my command, which it is God's peculiar prerogative to impart, spiritual light and affections, I required in effect of all with whom I conversed, that they should see with my eyes; and stood amazed that the gospel, which with me was all in all, should meet with opposition, or should occasion disgust in any. But the gospel could not be the Word of God if it did not; for it foretells its own reception among men, and describes it as exactly such. Good is intended, but harm is done too often by the zeal with which I was at that time animated. But as in affairs of this life, so in religious concerns likewise, experience begets some wisdom in

all who are not incapable of being taught. I do not now, neither have I for a long time made it my practice to force the subject of evangelical truth on any. I received it not from man myself, neither can any man receive it from me. God is light, and from Him all light must come; to *His* teaching, therefore, I leave those whom I was once so alert to instruct myself. If a man ask my opinion, or calls for an account of my faith, he shall have it; otherwise I trouble him not. Pulpits for preaching; and the parlour, the garden, and the walk abroad, for friendly and agreeable conversation."

Now, we hardly know of a more melancholy letter from Cowper in the whole collection of his correspondence than this. It could not have been Cowper's deliberate opinion that the heavenly themes of the pulpit are not fit for friendly and agreeable conversation, nor that the tender, affectionate, and faithful application of such themes may not be made, without any intrusiveness, in private to the conscience. The tone of a part of this letter painfully resembles that of Southey's own comments. But Cowper, when he wrote thus, had long been dwelling in the mere twilight of a religious gloom, and not in the enjoyment of his former sweet religious fervour and hope. From such a disastrous twilight, between the daylight and the darkness, he looked back to his former happy, animated, heavenly state of mind, and described it under the false colouring that now fell upon it from the habit of his own despair. But these were not his views in that joyful period when his earnest conversations with his own beloved brother were made so eminently the means of bringing him also to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus;

when his conversation and example shed such light and grace also upon the dear circle in which he moved in Olney, and when he composed those hymns, that have been God's manna to many a smitten soul in the wilderness, and will continue to be sung by the Church of God till time shall be no longer. Accordingly, from Cowper in gloom and darkness, we would appeal to Cowper walking in the light of his Redeemer's countenance; nay, we may appeal from Cowper's letter to the tenor of his own exquisitely devout and beautiful poem on "Conversation;" and from the irreligious criticisms of the man of literature merely, we would appeal to the judgment of a mind impressed with the value of the soul, happy in the presence of Christ, and alive to a sense of eternal realities.

Cowper's autobiography was written in the unclouded exercise of his reason, and with all the animated fervour and affection of a grateful heart, enjoying and praising God. The description of his experience at St Alban's in a letter to Lady Hesketh many years afterward, and the review of his ardour, in the letter just quoted, were composed beneath the darkness of his long religious gloom. Yet Southey has the hardihood to remark, that "the different state of mind in which Cowper described his malady at Olney to Lady Hesketh, from that in which he drew up the dreadful narrative of his madness in the Temple, and of his recovery at St Albans, might induce, if not a belief of his perfect restoration, a reasonable hope of it. In the former instance (his conversion) he fully believed that the happy change which had taken place in him was supernatural; and of this both Mr Newton and Mrs Unwin were so thoroughly persuaded that many

months elapsed after the second attack, violent as the access was, before they could bring themselves to ask Dr Cotton's advice. They thought that the disease was the work of the Enemy, and that nothing less than Omnipotence could free him from it. Means they allowed were in general not only lawful but expedient; but his was a peculiar and exempt case, in which they were convinced that the Lord Jehovah would be alone exalted when the day of deliverance was come. Cowper had now learned to take a saner view of his own condition."

It is painful to read such passages. They indicate, taken in connexion with others, an almost malignant hostility against the manifestations of divine grace, or rather against the belief that such exercises as Cowper passed through *are* the work of divine grace in the heart. Southey sneers at the supposition of anything supernatural in Cowper's happy change, and of course much more at the idea of there being anything *subter-natural*, anything of the workings of "the Enemy," in his malady. But there are not wanting passages in Cowper's own *letters* that look as if his mind *were* sometimes engaged in murky encounters with the Prince of Darkness; and it would be an interesting investigation to trace, in such a case, the evidences of the possible presence and power of such a Tempter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Comparison of Cowper's early sorrows and his late—His earliest poetry—
Difference between sympathetic and personal suffering—Poem in the
insane asylum compared with that in the asylum of God's grace.

WE are approaching now a very sad and gloomy period in Cowper's mental sufferings, when the fiends that had tracked his steps, or brushed past him with their dragon wings, or stood afar off and mocked him, seemed to close with him in a long and dreadful conflict. These terrors were real; and one need only compare the groans of a wounded spirit wrung out from his soul in these seasons of such painful endurance, with the tones of early sorrow from disappointed love expressed in the verses of his youth, to feel the tremendous difference between any mere earthly disappointment or grief, and the spiritual despair or darkness that separates the soul from God. Yet those early poems to the object of his youthful affections were beautiful, natural, unambitious, presenting plain indications of his genius; as indeed was the case with the very earliest of his compositions in poetical form known to have been preserved and identified—that admirable fragment written at Bath on finding the heel of a shoe, in 1748, when he had come to the age of seventeen. The characteristics of

the future poet of "The Task" are there so plainly developed, that a page cut from that poem itself would not have a more manifest resemblance; a very singular phenomenon indeed—the style, the humour, the language, the rhythm, all plainly foreshadowed, and the identity of manner maintained through the interval (in his case no small time) so confused and chaotic between seventeen and fifty.

In one of his letters he speaks of having written ballads at a period as early as the age of fourteen, having received a taste for that form of poetry from his own father, who himself was the author of several pieces. He also tried his hand at some of the Elegies of Tibullus; but none of those pieces he could afterward remember or recover. In one of his poetical epistles to Miss Theodora Cowper, in 1755, there occur the following lines, which seem to have been written in allusion to the refusal of her father to grant his sanction for their engagement,—his reasons for the inflexible determination being, first, their degree of relationship, and, second, Cowper's own want of fortune for their maintenance in a style corresponding to their family circle and rank.

"Ye who from wealth the ill-grounded title boast,
To claim whatever beauty charms you most;
Ye sons of fortune, who consult alone
Her parent's will, regardless of her own;
Know that a love like ours, a generous flame,
No wealth can purchase, and no power reclaim.
The soul's affection can be only given
Free, unextorted, as the grace of heaven."

One year before this, Cowper's epistle to his friend Lloyd speaks of the fierce banditti of his gloomy thoughts led on by spleen; and beyond question the disappointment in

regard to his affections, notwithstanding the consolation of knowing that those affections were returned, inflicted upon him no transitory nor trifling sorrow. In 1759 we trace his easy style in two of the Satires of Horace—

“In dear Matt Prior’s easy jingle”—

one of them being the humorous description of the journey to Brundusium. In 1762, just before the painful conflict and complication of distresses in regard to his examination for the clerkship, which brought on the first insanity, we have a poem addressed to Miss Macartney, afterward Mrs Greville, in which occur the following beautiful verses in the most perfect manner of many of his later minor pieces :—

“’Tis woven in the world’s great plan,
And fix’d by Heaven’s decree,
That all the true delights of man
Should spring from Sympathy.

“’Tis nature bids, and while the laws
Of nature we retain,
Our self-approving bosom draws
A pleasure from its pain.

“Thus grief itself has comforts dear,
The sordid never know,
And ecstasy attends the tear,
When virtue bids it flow.

“For when it streams from that pure source,
No bribes the heart can win
To check, or alter from its course,
The luxury within.

“Still may my melting bosom cleave
To sufferings not my own,
And still the sigh responsive heave
Where’er is heard a groan.

"So Pity shall take Virtue's part,
Her natural ally,
And fashioning my soften'd heart,
Prepare it for the sky."

Beautiful stanzas, and the sentiments most generous and true ! And yet it was not, after all, in this way of discipline that Cowper's heart was to be thoroughly subdued and purified, and prepared for a better world. The deepest natural sensibilities to other's woes may exist, without any sense of one's own guilt and misery, and without tending to produce such a sense. Nay, the very fact of pity taking virtue's part, may delude and delight the poor ignorant, sinful heart in regard to its own state, and make the owner think himself very near heaven, even by nature, needing nothing supernatural to bring him there. The being cut out of the olive which is wild by nature, and grafted into the True Olive-tree, is declared by Paul to be a process *contrary to nature*, and not merely above nature. And it is a process, at least in the first stages of cutting out, attended with much pain and conflict.

The very next poem composed by Cowper after that from which the preceding verses are quoted, exhibits him suddenly plunged from that state of quiet in which he could indulge "the luxury of sympathy within," to the bottomless depths of a personal despair and suffering. It was after his first attempt at suicide, and just before his removal to St Albans, that Cowper composed the following wild and terrible monody of self-condemnation and vengeance. No convicted criminal, he said, ever feared death more, or experienced more horrible dismay of soul, with conscience scaring him, and the avenger of blood pursuing him.

" Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution,
Wait with impatient readiness to seize my
Soul in a moment.

" Damn'd below Judas, more abhorr'd than he was,
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master !
Twice betray'd, Jesus, me the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.

" Man disavows, and Deity disowns me ;
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter ;
Therefore hell keeps her ever-hungry mouths all
Bolted against me.

" Hard lot ! encompass'd with a thousand dangers ;
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
I 'm call'd, if vanquish'd, to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's.

" Him the vindictive rod of angry Justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong.
I, fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb am
Buried above ground."

Over this Bridge of Sighs, where the smoke and flame from the gulf of perdition and despair roll and shoot across the pathway, we pass into another experience, as if we were transported from the gates of hell to the threshold, and the company, and the melodies of heaven. The very next efforts of Cowper's genius, and expression of his feelings, conveyed the gratitude and joy of his soul in those sacred hymns, for the composition of which these mental sufferings and gloom, and the faith in Christ by which, through the grace of Christ, he emerged from them, were the preparation. The second of them we place here in vivid contrast with the previous stanzas that were darkening with such lurid fire, to note that even the sorrow and despair which constituted so much of Cowper's experience

afterward for many years breathed rather the spirit of that sweet hymn of gratitude and grace, than the tones of a tortured conscience, without which despair is but a dream ; the spirit of submission, instead of the sense of retribution, characterised his gloom.

“ Far from the world, O Lord, I flee,
From strife and tumult far,
From scenes where Satan wages still
His most successful war.

“ The calm retreat, the silent shade,
With prayer and praise agree ;
And seem, by Thy sweet bounty, made
For those who follow Thee.

“ There, if Thy Spirit touch the soul,
And grace her mean abode,
Oh, with what peace, and joy, and love,
She communes with her God !

“ There like the nightingale she pours
Her solitary lays ;
Nor asks a witness of her song,
Nor thirsts for human praise.

“ Author and guardian of my life,
Sweet source of light divine,
And (all harmonious names in one)
My Saviour, thou art mine !

“ What thanks I owe Thee, and what love,
A boundless, endless store,
Shall echo through the realms above,
When time shall be no more.”

Now, the great superiority of this exquisite effusion over all the previous productions of Cowper, can be traced to but just one cause—the regeneration of his being by the grace of his Redeemer, and the baptism of all his faculties.

in the light of life. And before we pursue the deepening of his mental gloom till finally the sun of his existence itself went down in darkness, we wish to note the infinite difference, upon the mind as well as heart, between the effect of a troubled and despairing state of the conscience, and that of a mere simple destitution of hope, under a hallucination such as Cowper was afflicted with—the imagination, not that God was angry with him, nor that his sins had not been forgiven, nor that his heart was in rebellion against God, but that God, from some inexplicable necessity in His own attributes, had banished him for ever from His presence. Cowper's *conscience* was not distressed, but was at peace, and could not be otherwise, for his heart was profoundly submissive to God's will. And passing strange it was that these two things could exist together—love and despair, submission and the belief of being sentenced to eternal perdition; yet they did, and Cowper exhibited the marvellous phenomenon of a soul enriched with all pious feeling, and exhibiting the results of it in the most exquisite productions of sanctified genius, yet seemingly in the darkness of such despair. But if that despair had been the fire of an angry conscience, the only exercise of his genius would have been the repetition of those awful strains of

“Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion!”

The torture and despair of an angry conscience are realities that no social pleasantries can relieve, nor wit nor affection of sympathising friends diminish. Nor could any of Cowper's literary occupations have procured him any intervals of forgetfulness or peace, if the cause of his

suffering had been a conscience at war against himself, and a heart against his Maker. But with "the heart sprinkled from an evil conscience," and in humble submission to the will of God, even the delusions of insanity sometimes passed before him as a dream, and he could enjoy existence in spite of them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

His mother's picture—Letter to Lady Hesketh—Pleasant dwelling at Weston—Letters to Newton—Cheerfulness—Cowper's different views of his own condition—Style of divine providence—Care of Mrs Unwin.

THE tenderest, most affectionate, and pathetic of Cowper's poems were among the last; as he grew older his heart seemed to grow younger, notwithstanding the weary melancholy that oppressed him. It was not till 1790 that he received the gift of his mother's picture from his cousin, Mrs Bodham, and the letter in which he acknowledged it is one of the sweetest he ever wrote, as the poem in reference to it was one of the most exquisite expressions of his genius.

"My dearest Rose, whom I thought withered and fallen from the stalk, but whom I find still alive: nothing could give me greater pleasure than to know it, and to learn it from yourself. I loved you dearly when you were a child, and love you not a jot the less for having ceased to be so. Every creature that bears any affinity to my mother is dear to me, and you, the daughter of her brother, are but one remove distant from her; I love you, therefore, and love you much, both for her sake and for your own. The

world could not have furnished you with a present so acceptable to me as the picture which you have so kindly sent me. I received it the night before last, and viewed it with a trepidation of nerves and spirits somewhat akin to what I should have felt, had the dear original presented herself to my embraces. I kissed it, and hung it where it is the last object that I see at night, and of course the first on which my eyes open in the morning. She died when I had completed my sixth year, yet I remember her well, and am an ocular witness of the great fidelity of the copy. I remember, too, a multitude of the maternal tendernesses which I received from her, and which have endeared her memory to me beyond expression. There is in me, I believe, more of the Donne than of the Cowper, and though I love all of both names, and have a thousand reasons to love those of my own name, yet I feel the bond of nature draws me vehemently to your side. I was thought, in the days of my childhood, much to resemble my mother; and in my natural temper, of which, at the age of fifty-eight, I must be supposed a competent judge, can trace both her and my late uncle, your father. Somewhat of his irritability, and a little, I would hope, both of his and of her (I know not what to call it, without seeming to praise myself, which is not my intention, but in speaking to *you*, I will even speak out, and say) *good nature*. Add to all this, I deal much in poetry, as did our venerable ancestor, the Dean of St Paul's,* and I think I shall have proved myself a Donne at all points. The truth is, that whatever I am, I love you all."

Cowper wrote also to Mrs King a few days after the

* Dr John Donne, the celebrated divine and poet, born 1578, died 1631.

letter to his cousin, referring to the same picture of his mother, and saying : " I remember her perfectly, find the picture a strong likeness of her, and because her memory has been ever precious to me, have written a poem on the receipt of it ; a poem which, one excepted, I had more pleasure in writing than any that I ever wrote. That one was addressed to a lady whom I expect in a few minutes to come down to breakfast, and who has supplied to me the place of my own mother—my own invaluable mother—these six-and-twenty years. Some sons may be said to have had many fathers, but a plurality of mothers is not common."

This latter poem (the Sonnet to Mrs Unwin), and the lines on his mother's picture, may be perused together ; but only Cowper could understand what himself alone had experienced, the similarity and yet the difference between the gush of tender emotion with which he penned the one and the other. The sonnet to Mary is so perfect in its beauty that it could not but be universally admired ; but the lines to the memory of his mother go down as deep into *other* hearts also, as the love that inspired them in the depths of his own.

" Mary ! I want a lyre with other strings ;
Such aid from Heaven as some have feign'd they drew,
An eloquence scarce given to mortals, new,
And undebased by praise of meaner things !
That ere through age or woe I shed my wings,
I may record thy worth with honour due,
In verse as musical as thou art true,
Verse that immortalises whom it sings,
But thou hast little need ; there is a book,
By seraphs writ with beams of heavenly light,
On which the eyes of God not rarely look,
A chronicle of actions just and bright.

There all thy deeds, my faithful Mary, shine ;
And since thou own'st that praise, I spare thee mine."

The change from this poem to the lines on his mother's picture, is manifestly that of deeper feeling, though both pieces are from the heart.

"ON THE RECEIPT OF MY MOTHER'S PICTURE.

"Oh that those lips had language! Life has pass'd
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
Those lips are thine—thine own sweet smile I see,
The same that oft in childhood solaced me ;
Voice only fails, else how distinct they say,
'Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away !'
The meek intelligence of those dear eyes
(Blest be the art that can immortalise,
The art that baffles Time's tyrannic claim
To quench it !) here shines on me still the same.

"Faithful remembrancer of one so dear,
O welcome guest, though unexpected here !
Who bidst me honour with an artless song,
Affectionate, a mother lost so long.
I will obey, not willingly alone,
But gladly, as the precept were her own :
And, while that face renews my filial grief,
Fancy shall weave a charm for my relief,
Shall steep me in Elysian reverie,
A momentary dream, that thou art she.

"My mother ! when I learn'd that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed ?
Hover'd thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun ?
Perhaps thou gav'st me, though unfelt, a kiss ;
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss—
Ah, that maternal smile ! it answers—Yes.
I heard the bell toll'd on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nursery window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu !
But was it such ?—It was. Where thou art gone
Adieus and farewells are a sound unknown.
May I but meet thee on that peaceful shore,
The parting word shall pass my lips no more !

Thy maidens, grieved themselves at my concern,
 Oft gave me promise of thy quick return.
 What ardently I wish'd, I long believed,
 And, disappointed still, was still deceived.
 By expectation every day beguiled,
 Dupe of to-morrow even from a child.
 Thus many a sad to-morrow came and went,
 Till, all my stock of infant sorrows spent,
 I learn'd at last submission to my lot,
 But, though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot.
 "Where once we dwelt our name is heard no more,
 Children not thine have trod my nursery floor.
 And where the gardener Robin, day by day,
 Drew me to school along the public way,
 Delighted with my bauble coach, and wrapp'd
 In scarlet mantle warm, and velvet-capp'd,
 'Tis now become a history little known,
 That once we call'd the pastoral house our own.
 Short-lived possession ! but the record fair,
 That memory keeps of all thy kindness there,
 Still outlives many a storm, that has effaced
 A thousand other themes less deeply traced.
 Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,
 That thou mightst know me safe and wamly laid ;
 Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
 The biscuit, or confectionary plum ;
 The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestow'd
 By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glow'd :
 All this, and more endearing still than all,
 Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall,
 Ne'er roughen'd by those cataracts and breaks,
 That humour interposed too often makes ;
 All this still legible in memory's page,
 And still to be so to my latest age,
 Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay
 Such honours to thee as my numbers may ;
 Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
 Not scorn'd in heaven, though little noticed here.
 "Could Time, his flight reversed, restore the hours,
 When, playing with thy vesture's tissued flowers,
 The violet, the pink, and jessamin,
 I prick'd them into paper with a pin,
 (And thou wast happier than myself the while,
 Wouldst softly speak, and stroke my head, and smile) ;

Could those few pleasant days again appear,
Might one wish bring them, would I wish them here?
I would not trust my heart—the dear delight
Seems so to be desired, perhaps I might.
But no—what here we call our life is such,
So little to be loved, and thou so much,
That I should ill requite thee to constrain
Thy unbound spirit into bonds again.

“Thou, as a gallant bark from Albion's coast,
(The storms all weather'd, and the ocean cross'd)
Shoots into port at some well-haven'd isle,
Where spices breathe, and brighter seasons smile,
There sits quiescent on the floods, that shew
Her beauteous form reflected clear below,
While airs impregnated with incense play
Around her, fanning light her streamers gay;
So thou, with sails how swift! hast reach'd the shore,
'Where tempests never beat, nor billows roar;'^{*}
And thy loved consort on the dangerous tide
Of life long since has anchor'd by thy side.
But me, scarce hoping to attain that rest,
Always from port withheld, always distress'd—
Me howling blasts drive devious, tempest-toss'd,
Sails ripp'd, seams opening wide, and compass lost,
And day by day some current's thwarting force
Sets me more distant from a prosperous course.
But oh, the thought that thou art safe, and he!
That thought is joy, arrive what may to me.
My boast is not that I deduce my birth
From loins enthroned, and rulers of the earth;
But higher far my proud pretensions rise—
The son of parents pass'd into the skies.
And now, farewell. Time unrevoked has run
His wonted course, yet what I wish'd is done.
By contemplation's help, not sought in vain,
I seem to have lived my childhood o'er again;
To have renew'd the joys that once were mine,
Without the sin of violating thine;
And, while the wings of fancy still are free,
And I can view this mimic show of thee,
Time has but half succeeded in his theft—
Thyself removed, thy power to soothe me left.”

^{*} Garth.

The unequalled tenderness and pathos of this poem, and the universal experience of the sweetness and preciousness of a mother's love, by which all hearts answer to its exquisite touches, have rendered it perhaps the best appreciated and admired of all Cowper's productions. The note of his own sorrow is here, as everywhere, the same, "scarce hoping to attain that rest," to which, nevertheless, with undeviating constancy of desire, his heart was always turned. He might have been answered, in the beautiful language of his own consoling lines to a much afflicted child of God :—

" Ah ! be not sad ! although thy lot be cast
Far from the flock, and in a boundless waste !
No shepherd's tents within thy view appear,
But the chief Shepherd even there is near ;
Thy tender sorrows, and thy plaintive strain,
Flow in a foreign land, but not in vain ;
Thy tears all issue from a source divine,
And every drop bespeaks a Saviour thine ! "

Writing to Lady Hesketh, with a desire to make every thing in his situation and experience appear as pleasantly to her as he could conscientiously describe it, Cowper says : " He who hath preserved me hitherto will still preserve me. All the dangers that I have escaped are so many pillars of remembrance, to which I shall hereafter look back with comfort, and be able, as I well hope, to inscribe on every one of them a grateful memorial of God's singular protection of me. Mine has been a life of wonders for many years, and a life of wonders I in my heart believe it will be to the end. Wonders I have seen in the great deeps, and wonders I shall see in the paths of mercy also. This, my dear, is my creed."

But this is neither the creed nor the language, and these are not the feelings, either of hopelessness or despair, but of faith, and hope, and adoring gratitude and love. And while Cowper could write thus, he was gaining, by grace, a transitory victory—full of promise, although so transitory—over the soul's great Enemy, and his own habitual gloom.

It was by one of the paths of mercy in the Divine Providence that Cowper was led to change the place of his residence from Olney to Weston. This removal to a new and delightful abode was accomplished in 1786 through Lady Hesketh's affectionate perseverance and energy. The house at Olney had been always unfavourable to the health of its inmates. Cowper speaks of having been confined for years by the combination of locality and climate, from September to March, and sometimes longer. Besides the raw vapours issuing from flooded meadows, and the sitting-room, sometimes for months, over a cellar filled with water, Cowper said also that a gravel walk, thirty yards long, was all the open space he had to move in for eight months in the year, during thirteen years of such imprisonment.

Their walks and space for exercise from April to August were, however, delightful, and so was Cowper's own workshop, as he called it, in the garden. Take, for example, the following exquisite picture :—" I am writing in it now. It is the place in which I fabricate all my verse in summer time. The grass under my windows is all bespangled with dew-drops, and the birds are singing in the apple-trees among the blossoms. Never poet had a more commodious oratory in which to invoke his muse.

" We took our customary walk yesterday in the wilder-

ness at Weston, and saw with regret the laburnums, syringas, and guelder-roses, some of them blown, and others just upon the point of blowing, and could not help observing, 'All these will be gone before Lady Hesketh comes!' Still, however, there will be roses, and jassamin, and honeysuckle, and shady walks, and cool alcoves, and you will partake of them with us. But I want you to have a share of everything that is delightful here, and cannot bear that the advance of the season should steal away a single pleasure before you can come to enjoy it."

Mr Unwin was shocked when he first saw the house in which his mother and Cowper dwelt so long in Olney. It looked to him like a prison, and Cowper told him afterward that his view of it was not only just but prophetic. Nevertheless, some very happy years were spent there, and the quiet and sweetness, the refinement, purity, and piety of the domestic circle, threw around it an air of beauty. When they first thought of the residence at Weston, then the discomforts of the house at Olney came suddenly into view. Cowper told Mr Unwin that "it not only had the aspect of a place built for the purpose of incarceration, but had actually served that purpose through a long, long period, and they had been the prisoners. But a jail-delivery is at hand. The bolts and bars are to be loosed, and we shall escape. Both your mother's constitution and mine have suffered materially by such close and long confinement, and it is high time, unless we intend to retreat into the grave, that we should seek out a more wholesome residence." He told Mr Newton, on the same occasion, that "a fever of the slow-and-spirit-oppressing kind seemed to belong to all, except the natives

who had dwelt in Olney many years ;" and he thought that both Mrs Unwin and himself owed their respective maladies to the local causes that have been enumerated.

In thus speaking, Cowper did not refer to the burden of his despair, which he never attributed to physical disease, however much he might be willing to admit that it was exasperated by his nervous fevers. Neither the physical nor the mental derangements were produced by the marshes of Olney, for both had been developed in his system as early as his residence at London in the Temple. There, at the age of twenty-one, in 1752, he was "struck with such a dejection of spirits as none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of. Day and night," he says, "I was upon the rack, lying down in horror, and rising up in despair. I presently lost all relish for those studies to which I had before been closely attached ; the classics had no longer any charms for me ; I had need of something more salutary than amusement, but I had no one to direct me where to find it."

It was after his removal to Weston that the third attack of his mental malady occurred ; and the recovery from it (as has been noted) was as sudden as the attack. In reviewing it, he spoke of "those jarrings that made his skull feel like a broken egg-shell." There were causes both of physical and mental disease in his system, which would doubtless have been developed, had his residence from the outset been in Weston, or any other part of the kingdom, during the whole twenty-five years since his departure from St Albans ; but they might have been much repressed and modified, and perhaps at length nearly removed or conquered, had his manner of life been more active, and

his home more favourable to health. But neither physical nervous derangement, nor local miasma aggravating its power, nor mistakes in the manner of its treatment, can prove that there were no assaults from malignant spiritual adversaries. It is declared by divine inspiration to be the work of the god of this world to blind the minds of those that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should be received by them. It may be equally his work to produce delusion in the minds of those that believe, if he can by that means turn them astray, or diminish or destroy their usefulness. But Cowper was in the hands of God, not Satan, and thus far the Tempter might go, and no further than just to reveal the more brightly the wonderful grace of God. A thread of divine providence, Cowper was wont to say, ran through his whole life ; and he could trace divine interposition in every part of it ; but he felt that he could also trace the malignant interference of opposing powers. Who can say that he and Newton were mistaken ?

Some of Cowper's letters to Mrs King contain interesting and illustrative references to his own case, and his own opinion in regard to it. He told her that he was a strange creature, with singularities that would fill her with wonder if she knew them. " I will add, however," says he, " in justice to myself, that they would not lower me in your good opinion ; though perhaps they might tempt you to question the soundness of my upper storey. Almost twenty years have I been thus unhappily circumstanced ; and the remedy is in the hand of God only." He then says that all this unhappiness may vanish in a moment ; and if it please God it shall. " In the meantime, my dear

madam, remember me in your prayers, and mention me at those times as one whom it has pleased God to afflict with singular visitations."

This was in 1793, and at this time he not only besought the prayers of dear Christian friends for himself in his affliction, but was in the habit of commending them also to God in like manner at the throne of grace, when he heard of their distresses. This is evident from a letter to Newton on the declining health of his wife. Cowper closes it, "commending you and Mrs Newton, with all the little power I have of that sort, to His fatherly and tender care in whom you have both believed, in which friendly office I am fervently joined by Mrs Unwin."

In this same letter he says :—"Twice, as you know, I have been overwhelmed with the blackest despair ; and at those times everything on which I have been at any period of my life concerned, has afforded to the Enemy a handle against me. I tremble, therefore, almost at every step I take, lest on some future similar occasion it should yield him opportunity, and furnish him with means to torment me." He said this, in reference to the question of resorting to magnetism, which had been proposed by Newton, as an experiment which it might be well to try in Cowper's case ; but he had "a thousand doubts ;" and it was not thought best to attempt it.

"I could not sing the Lord's song," said Cowper, "were it to save my life, banished as I am, not to a strange land, but to a remoteness from His presence, in comparison with which the distance from east to west is no distance, is vicinity and cohesion. I dare not, either in prose or verse, allow myself to express a frame of mind which I am

conscious does not belong to me ; least of all can I venture to use the language of absolute resignation, lest, only counterfeiting, I should, for that very reason, be taken strictly at my word, and lose all my remaining comfort."

This was written in 1788, to his friend, Mr Bull, in answer to a request for some hymns from Cowper, or a proposition that he would employ his powers again in that kind of composition. "Ask possibilities, and they shall be performed," said Cowper ; "but ask not hymns from a man suffering from despair as I do." But when Cowper speaks of his remaining comfort, it is plain that he is not, and does not regard himself as being, a prey to absolute despair. He has some comfort, and is fearful of any step that might deprive him of it. It was only two years and a half before this date that Cowper began the renewal of his correspondence with Lady Hesketh.

Cowper lived in terror of the month of January, because it was the season in which he had been twice prostrated by the dreadful mental malady which had covered his life with gloom. He advanced toward the month, he told Newton, with a dread not to be imagined. He said he knew better than to be mastered by such terrors, for he knew that both he and the months were in the hand of God, and that one month was as dangerous as another, unless guarded by Him, whether in midsummer, at noon-day, and in the clear sunshine, or at midnight and in midwinter ; but he could not help it, could not avail himself of his knowledge. "I have heard of bodily aches and ails that have been particularly troublesome when the season returned in which the hurt that occasioned them was received. The mind, I believe (with my own,

however, I am sure it is so), is liable to similar periodical affections." When the dreaded month was past, he was "thankful to the Sovereign Dispenser both of health and sickness, who, though he had had such cause to tremble, gave him encouragement to hope that he might dismiss his fears."

In the intervals, and in the anticipation of an event to which he looked forward with delight, such as the visit from his beloved cousin Lady Hesketh, he could give a most cheerful, and, on the whole, a most sincerely cheerful description of himself. Then again it was a mixture of despondency and hope. "My health and spirits seem to be mending daily. To what end I know not, neither will conjecture, but endeavour, so far as I can, to be content that they do so. . . . But years will have their course and their effects; they are happiest, so far as this life is concerned, who do not grow old before their time. Trouble and anguish do that for some which only longevity does for others. A few months since I was older than your father is now, and though I have lately recovered, as Falstaff says, *some snatch of my youth*, I have but little confidence, in truth, none, in so flattering a change, but expect, *when I least expect it*, to wither again."

His repeated experience of sudden attacks and as sudden restorations, induced him at length to conclude that this was the appointed and peculiar *style* of God's providence in regard to him, and that it would last to the end; and, moreover, that he might be restored to perfect light, and peace, and blessedness, at a moment when he least expected it. All this was realised; but the end, not till he entered on the glory of a better world. The infinite

amazement and ecstasy of his spirit, when released from its prison, and, in the language of Paul, *found in Christ*, at his appearing and in his kingdom, can be thought upon in silence, but not shadowed forth in words. It was only an exercise of power and grace by the Lord of Life and Glory, greater than in the case of Lazarus, that could say, Loose him, and let him go ?

“There is,” says Cowper, “a certain style of dispensations maintained by Providence in the dealings of God with every man, which, however the incidents of his life may vary, and though he may be thrown into many different situations, is never exchanged for another. The style of dispensation peculiar to myself has hitherto been that of sudden, violent, unlooked-for change. When I have thought myself falling into the abyss, I have been caught up again ; when I have thought myself on the threshold of a happy eternity, I have been thrust down to hell. The rough and the smooth of such a lot, taken together, should perhaps have taught me never to despair ; but through an unhappy propensity in my nature to forebode the worst, they have on the contrary operated as an admonition to me never to hope. A firm persuasion that I can never durably enjoy a comfortable state of mind, but must be depressed in proportion as I have been elevated, withers my joys in the bud, and in a manner entombs them before they are born, for I have no expectation but of sad vicissitude, and ever believe that the last shock of all will be fatal.”

This was to Newton, in 1788, just after Cowper had enjoyed a visit from that dear and experienced friend, who knew his sorrows better than any other man living.

Cowper had found those comforts, which had formerly sweetened all their interviews, in part restored. He knew him, he said, for the same shepherd who was sent to lead him out of the wilderness into the pasture where the chief Shepherd feeds His flock, and felt his sentiments of affectionate friendship for him the same as ever. But one thing, he said, was wanting, and that thing the crown of all; referring to a personal assurance of redemption in Christ. "I shall find it in God's time, if it be not lost for ever. When I say this, I say it trembling; for at what time soever comfort shall come, it will not come without its attendant evil."

Two years later, in October 1790, in a very beautiful letter to the same dear friend, Cowper speaks of the sense one has, in a rural situation, of the rapidity with which time flies. The showers of autumn leaves were falling from the trees around him, and reminded him of the shortness of his existence here. There was a time, he says, when he thought of this with pleasure, and even "numbered the seasons as they passed in swift rotation, as a schoolboy numbers the days that interpose between the next vacation, when he shall see his parents and enjoy his home." But under the long continuance and deepening of his religious gloom, the absence of all hope, and the prevalence of the imaginary assurance that he was to be banished from God for ever, had made him look upon the shortness and the close of life with regret, though the consideration was once so grateful to him. He says he had become such another wretch as Mæcenas was, who wished for long life, he cared not at what expense of sufferings.

“The only consolation left me on this subject is, that the voice of the Almighty can in one moment cure me of this mental infirmity. That He can I know by experience ; and there are reasons for which I ought to believe that He will. But from hope to despair is a transition that I have made so often that I can only consider the hope that may come, and that sometimes I believe will, as a short prelude of joy to a miserable conclusion of sorrow that shall never end. Thus are my brightest prospects clouded, and thus to me is *hope itself become like a withered flower that has lost both its hue and its fragrance.*”

The language and the imagery in these extracts are very affecting ; yet the whole passages are proofs of what we have intimated, that Cowper's despair was not at any time absolute, but in general a singular and trembling mixture of fear and hope, so that he could seriously and soberly speak of the gloom as a *mental infirmity*, which God could dissipate, and of the idea of his certain perdition as a *notion*, which the Redeemer could dispossess from his mind at any moment. If his hope was like a withered flower, still he kept it as one treasures up a flower given by a very dear friend between the leaves of a very precious book, and though the flower is dry, yet the heart that loves the giver is not, but retains the same affection and esteem as ever. For even so did Cowper love and adore an unseen Saviour, and this delightful fact was sometimes singularly asserted in his dreams, when he would not have admitted it in his hours of wakeful despondency ; as in that instance to which we shall have occasion to refer, when he found himself exclaiming “ I love Thee even now, more than many who see Thee daily ! ”

In connexion with these letters to Newton in regard to his visit, how beautiful are the stanzas of poetry in which Cowper had sent him an invitation in the Spring. The piece closes with these three verses :—

“Old Winter, halting o’er the mead,
Bids me and Mary mourn;
But lovely Spring peeps o’er his head,
And whispers your return.

“Then April, with her sister May,
Shall chase him from the bowers,
And weave fresh garlands every day,
To crown the smiling hours.

“And if a tear that speaks regret
Of happier times appear,
A glimpse of joy that we have met
Shall shine, and dry the tear.”

These letters are still more striking, from the fact that even while writing them, Cowper was in the enjoyment of good health, and at the date of the last more than usually happy and cheerful in the family circle, Lady Hesketh being at that time a member of it. Cowper apologises for the “dismal strain” in which he has written, and then says: “Adieu, my dear friend. We are well; and notwithstanding all that I have said, I am myself as cheerful as usual. Lady Hesketh is here, and in her company even I, except now and then for a moment, forget my sorrows.”

Certainly it cannot be the gloom of despair, when the presence of a beloved friend can so effectually dispel the sorrow as to make it forgotten for days together, except now and then for a moment. Cowper had acquired, in the long comparative loneliness of his state, the habit of

brooding over his gloom, and if a cheerful, affectionate, and happy spirit like Lady Hesketh's could always have been with him, and especially to separate him from the charge of a perpetual anxious watchfulness over the declining health and faculties of his dear Mary, the result would have been very different. His mind and heart were in no condition to endure "the dreadful post of observation darkening every hour ;" and it was a terrible complication of inward gloom and images of despair, with such a reality of external distress answering to them, when the deplorable condition of his dearest friend came to be the subject of incessant care and contemplation.

CHAPTER XXV.

The year 1791—Friendship between Hayley and Cowper—Hayley's visit to Weston, and Cowper's to Eartham—Illness of Mrs Unwin—Engagement on Milton.

IN 1791 the interesting friendship between Hayley and Cowper commenced, with a frequent and affectionate correspondence by letter. Hayley then visited Cowper at Weston, and during the month of his visit, was enabled to calm and comfort his friend beneath the shock which the whole family sustained in an attack of paralysis with which Mrs Unwin was most suddenly and unexpectedly afflicted. Electricity was found to be a successful remedy, and she gradually recovered, though very feeble still when Hayley left them. At this time Hayley was forty-seven years of age, Cowper sixty-one, and Mrs Unwin nearly seventy. But from this period Cowper's mental malady seems to deepen and darken, while the intervals of relief and cheerfulness grow more infrequent and transient. His visit to Hayley at Eartham was a season of partial enjoyment, but Mrs Unwin's increasing illness was a cause of deep dejection and of ceaseless care. The gloom and distress of Cowper's mind were sometimes insupportable. Despair seemed not only to have involved his heart, but threat-

ened even a paralysis of his intellect. The dread delusion that his soul had been rejected of God still adhered to him, after his recovery from the attack in 1787, and his system was more than ever subject to nervous fever and disturbance. In his sleep he was racked with distressing dreams, and scared with visions, so that his nights were dreadful. "Distressed and full of despair, the day hardly ever comes in which I do not utter a wish that I had never been born. And the night is become so habitually a season of dread to me that I never lie down on my bed with comfort, and am in this respect a greater sufferer than Job, who, concerning his hours of rest, could hope at least, though he was disappointed; but in my case, to go to sleep is to throw myself into the mouth of my enemy."

In another letter he says, "I wake almost constantly under the influence of a nervous fever, by which my spirits are affected to such a degree that the oppression is almost insupportable. Since I wrote last, I have been plunged in deeps unvisited, I am convinced, by any human soul but mine; and though the day in its progress bears away with it some part of this melancholy, I am never cheerful, because I can never hope, and am so bounded in my prospects that to look forward to another year to me seems madness." Mrs Unwin, too, was in a deplorable condition, which itself overtasked Cowper's sympathy and care. Her paralytic illnesses were gradually rendering her own mind gloomy and helpless, so that the combination of distresses in their condition was deplorably affecting. "Like myself," wrote Cowper, "she is dejected; dejected both on my account and on her own. Unable to amuse herself either with work or reading, she looks forward to a new day with

despondence, weary of it before it begins, and longing for the return of night. Thus it is with us both. If I endeavour to pray, I get my answer in a double portion of misery. My petitions, therefore, are reduced to three words, and those not very often repeated, 'God have mercy.'"

This situation was so gloomily and deplorably painful, that, as Cowper himself said, it seemed miraculous in his own eyes, that always occupied as he was in the contemplation of the most distressing subjects, he was not absolutely incapacitated for the common offices of life. "My purpose," said he, "is to continue such prayer as I can make, although with all this reason to conclude that it is not accepted, and though I have been more than once forbidden, in my own apprehension, by Him to whom it is addressed." At another time he says, "Neither waking nor sleeping have I any communications from God, but am perfectly a withered tree, fruitless and leafless. A consciousness that He exists, that once He favoured me, but that I have offended to the forfeiture of all such mercies, is ever present with me; and of such thoughts consist the whole of my religious experiences."

Again, "I feel in the mean time everything that denotes a man an outcast and a reprobate. I dream in the night that God has rejected me finally, and that all promises and all answers to prayers made for me are mere delusions. I wake under a strong and clear conviction that these communications are from God, and in the course of the day nothing occurs to invalidate that persuasion. As I have said before, there is a mystery in this matter that I am not able to explain. I believe myself the only instance

of a man to whom God will promise every thing, and perform nothing." This impression was connected with a voice which he thought he heard in the year 1786, before the dreadful access of delirium in 1787, and which his diseased imagination interpreted as the voice of God, "I will promise you any thing."

Meanwhile, Cowper had undertaken the labour of a new edition of Milton with notes, the responsibility of which, the more clearly he saw the impossibility of accomplishing it, was as a dark mountain before him. He was also laboriously at work in another revision of his translation of Homer; and his hours of labour were so imprudently arranged, that this alone must have been a great exasperating cause of his depression. Notwithstanding his miseries by night, and his sufferings on waking—"I wake always," said he, "under a terrible impression of the wrath of God, and for the most part with words that fill me with alarm, and with the dread of woes to come"—notwithstanding this, he rose every morning at six, and worked incessantly and laboriously upon Homer till near eleven, before breakfasting! Some four hours of exhausting task-work, daily, in this cruel manner, so fatigued both body and mind as to render him utterly incapable of any other labour. This course was pursued at this time, in order that he might have the whole day, after Mrs Unwin rose, to devote uninterrupted to the care of that dear invalid; but it was exhausting and depressing in the highest degree.

What he sometimes endured at night, as well as by day, may be judged from some of his letters. "From four this morning till after seven I lay meditating terrors,

such terrors as no language can express, and as no heart, I am sure, but mine ever knew. My very finger-ends tingled with it, as indeed they often do. I then slept and dreamed a long dream, in which I argued with many tears that my salvation is impossible. I recapitulated in the most impassioned accent and manner the unexampled severity of God's dealings with me in the course of the last twenty years, especially in the year 1773, and again in 1786, and concluded all with observing that I *must* infallibly perish, and that the Scriptures which speak of the insufficiency of man to save himself can never be understood *unless* I perish." Again he says, "I was visited with a horrible dream, in which I seemed to be taking a final leave of my dwelling, and every object with which I have been most familiar, on the evening before my execution. I felt the tenderest regret at the separation, and looked about for something durable to carry with me as a memorial. The iron hasp of the garden-door presenting itself, I was on the point of taking that; but recollecting that the heat of the fire in which I was going to be tormented would fuse the metal, and that it would therefore only serve to increase my insupportable misery, I left it. I then awoke in all the horror with which the reality of such circumstances would fill me."

In one of his letters to Lady Hesketh, speaking of his continued labours upon Homer, Cowper says, and truly says: "Had Pope been subject to the same alarming speculations—had he, waking and sleeping, *dreamed* as I do, I am inclined to think he would not have been my predecessor in those labours; for I compliment myself

with a persuasion that I have more heroic valour, of the passive kind at least, than he had, perhaps than any man ; it would be strange had I not, after so much exercise."

The trains of Cowper's reasoning in his dreams may some of them be curiously and instructively compared with illustrations of a waking insanity ; as, for example, in the instance of George the Third, who once addressed himself to two persons long dead, under the idea that they were living and in his presence. "Your Majesty forgets," said Sir Henry Halford, "that they both died many years ago." "True," replied his Majesty, "died to you and to the world in general, but not to me. You, Sir Henry, are forgetting that I have the power of holding intercourse with those whom you call dead. Yes, Sir Henry Halford, it is in vain, so far as I am concerned, that you kill your patients. Yes, Dr Baillie ; but—Baillie, Baillie ?—I don't know. Baillie is an anatomist ; he *dissects* his patients ; and then it would not be a resuscitation merely, but a re-creation ; and that, I think, is beyond my power."

In the year 1787, just before the sudden and terrible attack of his malady, which was the third, Cowper had complained to Lady Hesketh of his nervous fever rendering his nights almost sleepless during a whole week. Then the fever left him entirely, and he slept quietly, soundly, and long. Then, most unexpectedly, ensued the dreaded crisis, and Cowper's mind seemed instantly to have plunged plumb down ten thousand fathoms deep into depths that he fully believed no other human being had ever sounded. The prostration continued for months, and the whole period, as to employment and social intercourse, was a vacuum, but not as to consciousness, though he never put

on record a single detail of his profoundly distressing experience.

But in that letter to Lady Hesketh which preceded this attack, he had been led, by a reference to Mrs Carter's opinions on the subject of dreams, to speak of his own, which, though he said with truth that he was free from superstition, he believed were sometimes prophetic. Mrs Carter, he said, had had no extraordinary dreams, "and therefore accounted them only the ordinary operations of the fancy. Mine are of a texture *that will not suffer me to ascribe them to so inadequate a cause*, or to any cause but the operation of an exterior agency. I have a mind, my dear (and to you I will venture to boast of it), as free from superstition as any man living, neither do I give heed to dreams in general as predictive, though particular dreams I believe to be so."

The time had been when the burden of Cowper's distress was felt in gloom and apprehension mainly in the day-time, but often in his dreams he had intervals of peace and joy, and renewed that blissful communion with God, of which his hymn entitled "Retirement" presents so exquisitely beautiful a description. At a later period there came a darker change, and day and night were but a variation of the same portentous clouds and images of woe. The reasoning in the dream concerning the iron hasp of the gate is exactly an instance of the manner in which an ordinary and confirmed lunatic will reason from his insane premises while wide awake. But this was not the type of Cowper's insanity, for his mind was under complete control in the day-time, and he was infinitely more sane in his dreadful depression and despair, in con-

sequence of believing that he was cut off for ever from the happiness of salvation, than any of his careless but affectionate friends were (for such he had) in their confidence and freedom from anxiety. If, as Southey has falsely said, Cowper's malady "had been what is termed religious madness," theirs was the worst madness of having no religion at all, the malady of an insane heedlessness about both its anxieties and its hopes. Dreams which by such minds would be scoffed at as the bugbears of superstition, would fill a heart that was truly anxious on the subject of an eternal state with trembling and astonishment. Such dreams might be, like the Gospel itself to men's waking vision, the means of thoughtfulness and grace to the one class, and of contempt and perdition to the other.

Once in a while his dreams were brighter. "I dreamed about four nights ago that, walking I knew not where, I suddenly found my thoughts drawn toward God, when I looked upward and exclaimed, 'I love Thee even now more than many who see Thee daily.'" How affectingly true in regard to the reality was this exclamation, though uttered in a dream, and though the afflicted reason of Cowper would not have dared to utter it waking!

The notes of his misery were given in greatest fulness to his neighbour and Christian friend, Mr Teedon, the schoolmaster at Olney, from whose papers it was that such revelations were at length presented of what Cowper really suffered. Mr Newton regarded Mr Teedon with friendly esteem, although Southey intimates that if Newton had been there on the ground, or if Mr Unwin had been living, and known what was going on, they would have interposed, the one on behalf of the afflicted poet, the

other on behalf of Mrs Unwin, to prevent them from having any resort to Mr Teedon's sympathy and prayers. Mrs Unwin had been wont to commend their suffering friend to Mr Teedon's supplications, that God would in mercy break away the dreadful gloom of his despondency, and restore to him the light of His countenance. Cowper himself was for a season comforted by his earnest prayers, and was accustomed to tell him, as in a sort of diary, the spiritual terrors he was passing through.

But Southey treats these communications between the poet and his humble Christian friend with scorn, and endeavours to hold up the schoolmaster to utter derision, as a contemptible mixture of the fool and fanatic, who presumptuously dared to suppose that he could pray for a being so superior to him in intellect as Cowper, and that God would give him such answers as might comfort the suffering heart in prison, and unable to pray for itself. Southey derides this man's prayers, and Cowper's application for them, as if they and it were pitiable and ridiculous to the last degree. He seems indignant that Cowper should have been a party to such spiritual consultations and efforts. Yet it was to Mr Teedon's affectionate arguments, persuasions, and encouragements, that Cowper yielded so far as to resume his own interrupted approaches to the throne of grace ; and when nothing on earth could minister to him one ray of comfort, he was enabled to glean some hope in the assured earnestness and constancy of this Christian friend's petitions for him at the mercy-seat. But Southey seems filled with anger at the very thought of comfort so administered ; it seems as if he regarded it as the last possible humiliation of lunacy that

Cowper should permit a poor, lowly schoolmaster at Olney to pray for him and consult with him. In truth, the brightest gleams of comfort in this dark, declining period of his life, and the only intervals of hope, were enjoyed by Cowper through the instrumentality of this despised Christian.

These records of what Southey calls pitiable consultations, treating them with most unfeeling contempt, are among the most affecting demonstrations both of Cowper's sufferings and of his genuine piety. They are no proof of superstition, but of confidence in prayer, unbroken even to the last, and confidence in God as the hearer of prayer. They convey, too, such manifestations of the affectionate gratitude of Cowper to the humble individual whom he regarded as instrumental of any spiritual blessing to him, or any alleviation of his distress, that there is more of pleasure than of painfulness, in this view, in their perusal. Cowper's first letter from Hayley's house at Eartham, in this distressing year, was written to Mr Teedon, (which Southey notes as in itself a great humiliation), and it contains the following sweet passage: "I had one glimpse—at least I was willing to hope it was a glimpse—of heavenly light by the way; an answer, I suppose, to many fervent prayers of yours. Continue to pray for us, and when any thing occurs worth communicating, let us know it. Mrs Unwin is in charming spirits, to which the incomparable air and delightful scenes of Eartham have much contributed. But our thanks are always due to the Giver of all good for these and all His benefits; for without His blessing, Paradise itself would not cheer the soul that knows Him."

It is remarkable that the wanderings of Cowper's mind

in the chaos of dreams, though continually pervaded by the same terror as by day, were mingled with intervals of celestial light and comfort. He was not always scared with visions, nor barred all access to the mercy-seat, but as if the soul had escaped for a season from its prison, and was soaring at liberty, he enjoyed heartfelt communion with God. And the following paragraphs in some of his notes to Mr Teedon shew that one beneficial effect was produced by Mr Teedon's prayerful efforts and affectionate counsels and entreaties, which the whole world of the wise and the literary could not have effected—they persuaded Cowper to persevere in prayer:—

“I have now persevered in the punctual performance of the duty of prayer. My purpose is to continue such prayer as I can make, although with all this reason to conclude that it is not accepted, and though I have been more than once forbidden, in my own apprehension, by Him to whom it is addressed. You will tell me that God never forbids anybody to pray, but, on the contrary, encourages all to do it. I answer—No. Some He does not encourage, and some He even forbids; not by words, perhaps, but by a secret negative found only in their experience.

“Since I wrote last, my nights have been less infected with horrid dreams and wakings, and I would willingly hope that it is in answer to the prayers I offer; lifeless as they are, I shall not discontinue the practice, you may be sure, so long as I have even this encouragement to observe it.

“Two or three nights since I dreamed that I had God's presence largely, and seemed to pray with much liberty. I then proceeded dreaming about many other things, all

vain and foolish; but at last I dreamed that recollecting my pleasant dream, I congratulated myself on the exact recollection that I had of my prayer, and of all that passed in it. But when I waked, not a single word could I remember; the single circumstance that my heart had been enlarged was all that remained with me."

To Newton he wrote as follows: "Prayer I know is made for me, and sometimes with great enlargement of heart by those who offer it; and in this circumstance consists the only evidence I can find that God is still favourably mindful of me, and has not cast me off for ever." This gleam of consolation was derived wholly from the freedom of his communications with Mr Teedon, called by Southey a dangerous superstition, and regarded as a mortifying proof of his insanity.

It is singularly interesting to compare and contrast these records of Cowper's conflicts, and of a fellow-Christian's sympathising efforts for him in prayer, and his own earnest desires and hopes that God might answer such prayer, though he himself seemed by solitary edict excluded from all hopeful approach to God as his Heavenly Father, with the records of really pitiable and humiliating superstition in Dr Johnson's Diary. These were remarked upon by Cowper himself in one of his letters to Newton in 1785, but Southey has not one word to utter in regard to the danger to be apprehended from *such* superstitions, while he sees in Cowper's anxiety for the prayers of a Christian friend, and in that friend's belief that such prayers are answered, nothing but proof of egregious self-conceit and vanity on one side, and a mind half insane on the other. Cowper speaks of the publisher of Johnson's

Diary as being "neither much a friend to the cause of religion, nor to the author's memory; for by the specimen of it that has reached us, it seems to contain only such stuff as has a direct tendency to expose both to ridicule. His prayers for the dead, and his minute account of the rigour with which he observed church fasts, whether he drank tea or coffee, whether with sugar or without, and whether one or two dishes of either, are the most important items to be found in the childish register of the great Johnson, supreme dictator in the chair of literature, and almost a driveller in his closet; a melancholy witness to testify how much of the wisdom of this world may consist with almost infantine ignorance of the affairs of a better."

The record in Johnson's Diary is that of deplorable superstition and Romish bondage unto fear, arising from the want of an intelligent apprehension of the method of redemption in Christ, and a heartfelt reliance upon his atoning mercy for justification. But the record in Cowper's history, and in the broken series of notes between him and Mr Teedon, is of a mind fully awake both to the terrors of hell and the glories of redemption, and also perfectly acquainted with God's method of acceptance and of pardon, and perfectly submissive to that method, and relying only on that; a mind also encompassed with spiritual terrors, and burdened with despair, but at the same time confident in God's readiness to hear and answer prayer, and expecting relief, grace, and deliverance in no other way; not by observing church fasts, or drinking tea without sugar, or setting always the left foot first across the threshold,

but by faith in the Lord Jesus, and prayer in His all-prevailing name as our Advocate with God.

It is a picture of the dreadful conflict of a mind "plunged in deeps," as Cowper thought, "unvisited by any other human soul;" a child of God, harassed with the belief that for a special and peculiar reason God would not hear his own prayers, and sometimes forbade him to pray, turning for help and hope to the intercessions of a fellow-Christian, acquainted with that conflict, and filled with sympathising grief on account of it, and to whom Cowper believed, and had reason to believe, that God granted daily enjoyment in prayer, daily and sweet access to the throne of grace. Now, in all this Cowper certainly had both apostolic examples and injunctions to guide him, and the instructions of Divine Inspiration to sanction his course. Paul never intimates that it is egregious conceit and vanity in any common Christian to imagine that God will answer his prayers, but he does earnestly beg all common Christians (common or uncommon) to pray for him, and he does say that he fully expects particular blessings through their prayers. And the Apostle James says indeed nothing about getting relief to a burdened heart by drinking tea without sugar, but he does say, confess your sins one to another, *and pray one for another*; and he does not intimate that the prayers of a literary man and a poet are of any greater efficacy before God than those of a poor schoolmaster; he does not intimate that a man must be learned and refined before he can dare presume that God will hear his prayers; neither does he intimate that prayers from the prayer-book will be heard, while extempore prayers from the Christian's own heart,

if offered in the confidence that God will hear them, are only fanaticism and presumption.

Furthermore, the sorrows, terrors, and burdens of the soul are the very evils of all others, in which God would have Christians seek the aid of one another's prayers ; and to rely on sincere prayer, in such a case, is not to rely on man, but God. The affectionate turning of Cowper's despairing heart to Mr Teedon's prayers for spiritual sympathy and comfort, is a most striking proof of the prevalence of faith and Christian fellowship even above despair. Cowper felt a confidence in Mr Teedon's Christian character from long acquaintance with him ; and the failings of tediousness and verboseness in conversation, with some foibles of vanity even, were little things in comparison with the possession of an honest, grateful, and sympathising heart. Cowper was not a man easily to be deceived or imposed upon, but he had very great discernment of character, and was never in the habit of concealing or denying his impressions. For example, in one of his letters to Newton, in the year 1784, he thus speaks of a man whom they had both known, and whose professions of religious experience, it would seem, had been somewhat large : " He says much about the Lord and His dealings with him ; but I have long considered James as a sort of peddler and hawker in these matters, rather than as a creditable and substantial merchant."

Mr Teedon, Cowper knew to be a very different person, sincere and fervent in his Christian emotions, and irreproachable in his Christian life. As he had known much of Cowper's trials, and for a long space of time, it was very natural that both Cowper and Mrs Unwin should not turn

away from a Christian sympathy expressed by him in notes as well as in conversation, but should somewhat freely, and with kindness, answer his inquiries. Hence the communications that sprang up between them ; earnest desires for prayer and help on the one side, and assurances of prayer and encouragements to hope that it would be answered on the other. The Christian circles at Olney and at Weston did not despise Mr Teedon for his poverty, nor for the fact of his gaining an humble subsistence in the capacity of village schoolmaster ; nor did they regard it as a mark of egregious vanity and conceit in him to suppose that God might possibly answer his prayers, any more than in Newton himself, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, praying on the Lord's-day out of the prayer-book.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Lord Mahon's accusation against Wesley—The immediate efficacy of prayer—Danger of delusion in a religion established by the State—Consistency of Cowper with Scripture in asking an interest in others' prayers—Letters to Newton and Hayley.

LORD MAHON, in his History of England, in the chapter on Methodism, says that a "solemn accusation might have been brought against Wesley for the presumption with which he sometimes ascribed immediate efficacy to his prayers." He also says, among other evils of his career enumerated, "that very many persons have been tormented with dreadful agonies and pangs ;" besides the great evil of the Church being weakened by so large a separation from it as the formation of the Methodist churches occasioned.

The agonies and pangs were simply those that Paul himself experienced when he found himself slain by the Law ; those that Bunyan and Luther experienced in a conflict protracted beneath the burden and the sense of guilt, much longer than Paul's was, before they would learn the lesson which the Law, as our schoolmaster, was appointed to teach in bringing us to Christ ; and those that Cowper also experienced ; but which Southey, and others with him, regarded as a dangerous delusion, result-

ing from an exaggerated idea of human depravity. If it is an evil that very many persons should be thus tormented, would ignorance of sin, and insensibility to its guilt and danger, be the smaller evil, or the preferable way? Or is there any way into the kingdom of Heaven without some experience of such pangs and agonies? There is, indeed, a way into the Church, smooth, easy, inoffensive; but that is not necessarily Heaven, nor does belonging to the Church necessarily include the knowledge or experience of religion. Yet such would seem to be Lord Mahon's and Southey's idea of piety, or a main element in it, and security of it; a religion established by the State; a Church, the membership of which is to be accepted as salvation. And to compel people to come into the Church by pangs and agonies, when they ought to be members of it in their own right by law, by simple baptism and morality, is a great injury and oppression!

The historian's idea of religion must be curious, indeed, judging from such complaints. Then, again, it is asserted to be presumption, an element of fanaticism and vanity, such as Southey says Mr Teedon was inspired with, for an individual Christian to suppose that God will hear and at once answer his prayers; for the immediate efficacy of prayer can be only in the way of such answer, and that is what the accusation means. A proper and respectable religion, therefore, such as is embodied in the Established Church of England, must, in the view of many, eschew and reject such an element. Prayer can be efficacious only by virtue of the Church, and can be answered only in a churchly way, but not for any individual soul by itself! Is it possible that a man of intelligence and learn-

ing, with any knowledge of the Gospel, can deliberately repose his confidence on such a piety, and believe himself insured into salvation by organic Church life, and participant in the efficacy of prayer by belonging to a Church that has an established liturgy ?

It were worth while for such a person to question with himself what could the Apostle James have meant, in referring all believers to the example of Elijah, as an incontrovertible proof that any believing soul, coming to God in the confidence that He is the rewarder of all who diligently seek Him, shall be likewise directly answered. Why did James take pains to remind us of the fact that Elias was a man subject to like passions as ourselves, except for the purpose of establishing the fact, that it is a universal rule, irrespective of churches and of persons, that God does hear and answer prayer, if presented in sincerity and faith ? The case of Elias was a great precedent, interpreting this rule—first, because Elias was a man, not an angel, nor a Church ; second, because he was a man of the same passions and infirmities as we are, and not a perfect man, and neither heard nor answered on account of his perfection or his prayer-book, but on account of God's mercy and his own faith. So shall any man of like passions be heard and answered.

Moreover, it were well to ask what would that personal piety be worth which was not distinguished by a belief in the immediate efficacy of prayer ? Can there be such a thing as true prayer without something of that belief ? If the Lord Jesus has taught His disciples to pray, believing that they shall receive those things for which they ask according to the will of God, and has even based the

acceptableness of their prayers on that belief, then the disciple who has not that belief is destitute of an essential ingredient in the spirit of prayer. Perhaps Lord Mahon meant what the Duke of Wellington was wont to call *fancy-prayers*; that is, extempore prayers, without the prayer-book. Probably Lord Mahon, as a good Churchman, would not have ascribed presumption to Wesley if he had prayed only out of the prayer-book; would not have accused him of fanaticism for imagining an immediate efficacy in *those* prayers. It was only *his* prayers, Wesley's, which it was presumptuous to suppose were attended with immediate efficacy!

And it would seem from such a scheme, that even if the prayers in the prayer-book are assumed and offered by individual members of the Church, it is presumption in any one to suppose that they can be answered as the prayers of the individual, on the exercise of the individual's desires and faith; such a thing as an answer is only to be expected on the ground of the right of the Established Church to present the supplication; and only through the mediation of the Church. The Church and the prayer-book in such a case are but the Pope and the Priest "writ large;" and there is as effectual a barrier interposed between the soul and Christ, as there is by penance and the confessional, instead of prayer.

A singular conception is the true historical conception of a religion established by the State,—a religion simply and solely of prescribed forms and prayers, with a decent morality attached to them, together with a security against all enthusiasm. A conservative religion, protecting the community from being tormented with dreadful agonies

and pangs, by the assurance of being personally stereotyped into Heaven by reliance on the proxy of an accepted liturgy, efficacious on account of an organic Church-life, imparted through it to the soul of every worshipper ! How inestimable the favour of a sound religious currency established by law, as genuine and infallible as the notes of the Bank of England ; an experience superscribed and minted, as the Church and Cæsar's appointed coin, the possessors of which shall defy all pangs and agonies, passing into the Kingdom like the Iron Duke, by virtue of the prayer-book under his arm ! The holders of such coin look down with pity and contempt on an experience like that of John Bunyan, for example, as being the fever of a burning enthusiasm, from which the true Church happily exempts and defends her children.

“ Very many persons have been tormented with dreadful agonies and pangs ” by the undignified and cruel system of a personal experience of religion introduced by John Wesley ; agonies and pangs under the conviction of being lost sinners, which might all have been avoided by trusting in the Church, the prayer-book, and the sacraments. Alas, what a frightful delusion is this ! And what multitudes of immortal beings, as capable of reasoning in regard to their eternal destiny as Lord Mahon, and with the sacred Scriptures before them, are at this very day staking their all for eternity on the assurance that they are safe from perdition by the sacraments and the Church ! With reference to just such a delusion prevailing in the Jewish Church, our blessed Lord told the Jews and His own disciples, that the children of the kingdom, they that trusted in the Church and in their belonging to it, should be cast

into outer darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The Pharisee, belonging to the kingdom, ridicules the prayer of the humble Publican, *God be merciful to me, a sinner!*—and rejects with contempt the idea of the fanaticism that would ascribe immediate efficacy to such prayer. Poor Mr Teedon, the schoolmaster! To think that Cowper should be reduced to such humiliation of mind as to beg an interest in such a Christian's prayers, and venture to hope for an answer to them!

It is an impressive and illustrative anecdote which is related of Archbishop Secker on his sick bed, when visited by Mr Talbot, Vicar of St Giles's, Reading, who had lived in great intimacy with him, and received his preferment from him. "You will pray with me, Talbot," said the archbishop, during their interview. Mr Talbot rose up, and went to look for a prayer-book. "That is not what I want now," said the dying prelate; "kneel down by me, and pray for me in the way I know you are used to do." The man of God readily complied with this command, and kneeling down, prayed earnestly from his heart for his dying friend the archbishop, whom he saw no more.

We can see no reason why Mr Teedon might not offer as earnest and acceptable prayer for Cowper as Mr Talbot for Archbishop Secker. And if the archbishop needed such prayer when dying, and was not insane in asking for it, the poet also might have need of it living, and his seeking for it was not necessarily a proof of insanity, but the reverse.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Impressive lessons from Cowper's imaginary despair—God does not require any to be willing to be damned ; but eternal separation from God is damnation—Mistake of mysticism and poetry—Cowper submissive to God's will, but not willing to be separated from Him—Cowper's gentleness—False remark of Leigh Hunt in regard to Romney's portrait of Cowper.

THE spectacle of Cowper's misery and helplessness beneath the despotism of an imaginary despair, conveys a most vivid and impressive lesson of the necessity of spiritual joy for active usefulness. Hope is not only the anchor, but the impulsive power of the soul. Hence we see the error, even in Madame Guion, of a mysticism that seeks to rise to an unreal exaltation, an imaginary and impossible elevation, not only not enjoined in the Word of God, but forbidden by the principles of true piety. One of her pieces, translated by Cowper, contains the following stanza, supposed to be the language of a soul brought to such a point of absolute self-renunciation as to be willing that God should depart for ever. And this is imagined to be the ineffable point of acquiescence, to which God, in hiding His face, would bring the soul that loves Him. Translated from poetry into plain prose, it is the requisition that a man be willing to be damned ; that is to say, it is submission

to Satan's will, not God's, that is required of the sinner ; for God's will is, that man should not only desire to be saved, but that every believing man *shall* be saved ; while Satan's will is, that man should be willing to be lost, and should be lost.

“ Be not angry ; I resign,
Henceforth, all my will to Thine :
I consent that Thou depart
Though Thine absence breaks my heart ;
Go, then, and for ever too ;
All is right that Thou wilt do.
This was just what Love intended,
He was now no more offended ;
Soon as I became a child,
Love return'd to me and smiled.”

Now this is exaggeration to the verge of impiety. God says, Woe unto them, when I depart from them. And in all the realm of true theology there is not the beginning of a requisition from God that any of His creatures should be willing to have Him depart from them for ever. Accordingly, we see how different was the character of Cowper's experience ; even in his madness, it was more consonant with God's Word. For he was *not* willing that God should depart from him, and while a ray of reason remained, he could not be. And, in truth, the whole essence and acuteness of his misery was in just this, that he believed God *had* departed from him ; and hence he suffered, as far perhaps as any creature *not* deserted of God, but only under a delusion, could suffer, something of the torture of eternal despair. If this belief had always prevailed, as in some exasperations of his malady it did prevail, he could never have put pen to paper, never could have occupied his exquisite genius, his transparent intel-

lect, so admirably balanced in all other respects, on any subject of thought whatever, and not even on the subject of his despair. There would have ensued the blackness and confusion of an absolute chaos. Again and again, under the influence of such despair, Cowper exclaimed, Oh, that I had never been born, or that I could cease to be for ever ! How much truer to the truth, to the reality of things in this matter, was Cowper's madness than Milton's poetry ! For Milton has put into the mouth of one of his lost angels, in melancholy eloquence of language, a preference of continued existence, even in despair and pain, rather than the cure by annihilation.

“ And that must end us ; that must be our cure,
To be no more : sad cure ! for who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through eternity ? ”

But the absence of God from the soul, and an eternal banishment from Him, could not be compatible with any joy or consolation from the thoughts that wander through eternity, at least *was* not in the case of Cowper. And it is worthy of notice that Milton has himself ascribed those lines to a slothful and ignoble devil, ever intent on making the worse appear the better reason, and has besides supposed the light of hope still shining, and the worst not known ; so that this language was not the language of despair. The fallen spirit that counselled sloth, not peace, imagined still that happier days might wait them :—

“ Our Supreme Foe in time may much remit
His anger ; and, perhaps, thus far removed,
Nor mind us, not offending, satisfied
With what is punish'd ; whence these raging fires
Will slacken if His breath stirs not their flames.
Our purer essence then will overcome

Their noxious vapour ; or inured, not feel ;
Or changed at length, and to the place conform'd
In temper and in nature, will receive
Familiar the fierce heat, and, void of pain,
This horror will grow mild, this darkness light ;
Besides what hope the never-ending flight
Of future days may bring, what chance, what change
Worth waiting."

This, then, is the reasoning, not even of imaginary despair, but of hope ; while Cowper's insanity was the adoption of what the feelings and the language of absolute despair would have been, if real. Insanity itself is truer to nature than insensibility and unbelief ; and insanity is preferable, in such an interest, to ignorance, presumption, and misrepresentation.

And whatever men may think or say as to the cause of Cowper's insanity, there is a most instructive lesson from its manifestation. It is a very solemn picture of the misery which may and must be consequent on the destruction of all hope in the eternal world. It cannot be borne. The best constituted and the strongest mind cannot endure it. If ever any man had a combination of faculties and feelings, of genius and affection, which could enable him to bear up under the pressure of sorrows, it was Cowper. He united in his own heart and intellect a sensitive nervous susceptibility, both natural and spiritual, to the touches both of sorrow and joy ; and a tender, compassionate concern for others' distresses, along with an elastic, buoyant spirit, a native power of humour, and an exquisite relish of true wit and drollery, that could seize the element of laughter, even amid care and pain, and for the moment forget every thing but the ludicrous. Naturally, he loved to look on the bright side, not the dark,

and was not to be imposed upon by the exaggeration of difficulties.

Now in all common suffering, *all* suffering this side that world where there is *no* suffering which is not *endless*, these faculties, this happy constitution of mind and heart, would bear up a man through great conflicts, would support and encourage him. The spirit of such a man could sustain his infirmity; but take away hope, and a spirit so wounded, who can bear? No man, even in this life, can endure even the *delusion* of despair, the moment it approaches much resemblance to the reality. It is truly an infernal power, a power of madness, contradictory and chaotic, demonstrated by its hurrying even through self-murder, *into* the reality, beforehand. The very image is so terrible that it takes away the reason. And faith in Christ, humble, affectionate confidence in Him, is the only true keeper of the reason of a fallen man. The peace of God, that passeth all understanding, keeps both heart and mind in Christ Jesus, and that only can.

And here, we must remark, what has never been properly noted, the characteristic of Cowper's insanity, as only against himself, but gentle, kind, affectionate, and loving toward all others. The whole circle and combination of his intellectual powers were transfused with adoration and love toward the Redeemer, and charity toward all mankind. His were a mind and affections sanctified, a tender conscience in reference to himself, a tender sympathy and forbearance toward others, entire freedom from bigotry, yet a most holy reverence toward God, an ardent love of the truth, and a jealousy for its purity, glory, and defence; every fruit, and all the graces of the Spirit, in

their turn, excepting that of hope only. A most extraordinary nature, a most marvellous development, a manifestation of piety, and a growth of holiness, even in a frozen zone, such as earth has rarely, if ever witnessed ; the growth of righteousness even where the beams of the Sun of Righteousness were intercepted by a malignant eclipse, nearly life-long ! A warm and open Polar Sea, and banks of tropical shrubbery and flowers upon its borders, amid surrounding ice-mountains, and beneath an atmosphere so freezing, that whole ships' crews have been rigidly fastened to their decks in death, even in the work of exploration, would not be so supernatural a phenomenon. This is what God can do, but not man ; grace, even denied and invisible, but not morality.

Moreover, there was never, in Cowper's insanity, any thing of the ordinary repulsive or terrible character of madness, nor any approximation thereto ; never any malignity or fierceness toward others, but even in the uttermost sullenness of gloom a timidity and meekness ; a harmlessness, as divested of the power and the disposition of violence and passion, as a crushed rose-bud, or a daisy trodden under foot. Hence the singular impropriety and want of truth in that expression of Leigh Hunt in regard to Cowper's picture, that it developed "a fire fiercer than that either of intellect or fancy, gleaming from the raised and protruded eye." If that fierceness was in Romney's painting, it was wholly false to the original ; for none of his dearest and most intimate friends ever saw it, or imagined it, in Cowper's own countenance ; and it certainly never existed in his melancholy. The thing lay wholly in the imagination of the critic ; for

neither in the mind, nor looking out at the eye, was there ever any flashing of such a fire ; only a pensive or suffering expression, but never a crazy, nor aggressive, nor glaring light. If such light were in the portrait, it would be a sure test of its untruth, and of the ambitious hand of a painter striking at a caricature ; but it is entirely unlikely that Romney had any such intention or idea. Hayley regarded the portrait as one of the most faithful and masterly resemblances he ever beheld ; and Cowper thought it strange that it should shew no marks of his own habitual sorrow. Absurd, indeed, it was to speak of a fierce fire as gleaming from the eye ; absurd to imagine any ground for such a representation in the character or habitual expression of the poet. Cowper's sonnet to the painter was composed in 1792.

“ Romney ! expert infallibly to trace
 On chart or canvas, not the form alone
 And semblance, but, however faintly shewn,
 The mind's impression, too, on every face,
 With strokes that time ought never to erase ;
 Thou hast so pencill'd mine, that though I own
 The subject worthless, I have never known
 The artist shining with superior grace.
 But this I mark, that symptoms none of woe
 In thy incomparable work appear :
 Well ! I am satisfied it should be so,
 Since, on maturer thought, the cause is clear ;
 For in my looks what sorrow couldst thou see,
 When I was Hayley's guest, and sat to thee ? ”

The absurdity of supposing that the painter had either detected or portrayed the fire of insanity in a face, the owner of which was in the perfect possession and exercise of the gentlest affections, and of a calm and reasoning mind, at the time when the portrait was taken, and had

been for twenty years, with the exception of an interval of six months, is exceedingly great. The only interval of insanity from 1773 to 1792, the time when the portrait was taken, had been in the year 1787 ; and even in that attack there does not appear to have been any of the glaring of this unnatural fire, but simply the lowest depths of mental despondency and suffering. To suppose that the expression of such a transitory interval would predominate in Cowper's eye over the habitual character of twenty years of peacefulness and heavenly affection, would be contrary to all fact and reason ; and it is the veriest affectation or frenzy of critical discernment to imagine such an expression on the canvas.

Mr Grimshaw, indeed, says that there was an air of wildness in Romney's portrait of Cowper, expressive of a disordered mind, which the shock produced by the paralytic attack of Mrs Unwin was rapidly impressing on his countenance. The portrait by Abbot was that of his customary and more placid features. Now, since Abbot's portrait was taken more immediately after Mrs Unwin's illness than Romney's, if Cowper's features had worn that air of wildness at all, it would most likely have been at that time ; in fact, when Romney painted him, Mrs Unwin had received so much benefit from the journey to Eartham, that Cowper was greatly comforted ; and in the very letter in which he announced to Lady Hesketh the completion of Romney's picture, he says concerning himself, " I am, without the least dissimulation, in good health ; my spirits are about as good as you have ever seen them ; and if increase of appetite and a double portion of sleep be advantageous, such are the advantages that I have received

from this migration. As to that gloominess of mind which I have had these twenty years, it cleaves to me even here, and, could I be translated to Paradise, unless I left my body behind me, would cleave to me even there also. It is my companion for life, and nothing will ever divorce us."

The wildness in Cowper's face at this time, if Romney threw such an expression on the canvas, was purely fanciful; and Cowper himself would have detected and marked it sooner than any one, had there been the fierce fire of insanity glaring from the eye. But neither his friends nor himself saw any such expression, though all agreed it was the most exact resemblance possible.

In a letter written near this period to Mrs Charlotte Smith, the authoress, Cowper gives expression to a very beautiful and tender train of contemplations awakened in his pensive mind by one of her remarks to Hayley. "I was much struck," says he, "by an expression in your letter to Hayley, where you say that *you will endeavour to take an interest in green leaves again*. This seems the sound of my own voice reflected to me from a distance, I have so often had the same thought and desire. A day scarcely passes at this season of the year, when I do not contemplate the trees so soon to be stripped, and say, Perhaps I shall never see you clothed again. Every year as it passes makes this expectation more reasonable; and the year with me cannot be very distant, when the event will verify it. Well! may God grant us a good hope of arriving in due time where the leaves never fall, and all will be right!"

This was written in the autumn of 1792, and only one

more spring ever came, in which that sensitive Christian poet, who had loved nature with such unaffected love, could ever again take his wonted interest in green leaves. The last years of his and Mrs Unwin's life were like the ominous evolutions of a Greek tragedy, distinctly foreboded, and gloomily marching on with the decision of inexorable fate.

A year and more after the date of Romney's painting, Lawrence executed another portrait of Cowper, in which, if in either of the three, the indications of gloom and wildness must have been visible, if drawn from nature. For it was at this time, October 1793, that Cowper was in the greatest distress between the pressure of his melancholy, the burden of engagements which he could not fulfil, and his anxiety of mind for poor Mrs Unwin ; yet in Lawrence's picture there was not the least trace of the imagined supernatural fire.

Early in November, Hayley paid him another visit ; and it was the last in which Cowper's afflicted reason could enjoy a gleam of happiness. It was in reference to this visit that Hayley wrote his interesting description of the evils that seemed impending over the once cheerful household of his dear friend. " My fears for him in every point of view were alarmed by his present very singular condition. He possessed completely at this period all the admirable faculties of his mind, and all the native tenderness of his heart ; but there was something indescribable in his appearance which led me to apprehend that without some signal event in his favour, to reanimate his spirits, they would gradually sink into hopeless dejection. The state of his aged, infirm companion afforded additional

ground for increasing solicitude. Her cheerful and beneficent spirit could hardly resist her own accumulated maladies, so far as to preserve ability sufficient to watch over the tender health of him whom she had watched and guarded so long."

Only two months afterward, in 1794, Cowper wrote to his dear friend Rose, saying, "I have just ability enough to transcribe, which is all that I have to do at present. God knows that I write at this moment under the pressure of sadness not to be described." In the course of two months more, Hayley was informed by a letter from Mr Greatheed of the deplorable condition of Cowper beneath such an increase of his gloom, as almost to deprive him of the use of every faculty, threatening indeed a speedy close of life. This letter was dated April 8, 1794, and Hayley, immediately on the receipt of it, hastened to Weston; but his dear friend was so profoundly overwhelmed and oppressed beneath the anxiety and despair produced by the physical and mental malady, that he took no welcome notice of his coming, nor at any time could manifest the least sign of pleasure at his presence; although a few months before, nothing on earth except the presence of Lady Hesketh, whom he loved with as much tenderness as a sister, could have given him such delight as Hayley's visit.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Cowper's complaint and Jeremiah's—Sincerity of Cowper in every expression of Christian feeling—Letter to Mr Rose—Letters to Unwin and Newton—Christian experience in spite of despair—Christian sympathy in others' trials—Poem on the four ages—Mrs Unwin's illness and Cowper's gloom—Poem to Mary.

THE first eighteen verses of the third chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah are a most perfect representation of the belief and experience of Cowper for the greater part of twenty years. "I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. He hath led me and brought me into darkness and not into light. Surely, against me He is turned; He turneth His hand against me all the day. He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about that I cannot get out; He hath made my chain heavy. Also, when I cry and shout, He shutteth out my prayer. He hath filled me with bitterness, He hath made me drunken with wormwood. He hath also broken my teeth with gravelstones, He hath covered me with ashes. And I said, My strength and my hope are perished from the Lord."

But the misery of Cowper was, that in his case, that which, with the afflicted and mourning prophet, was the language of grief and of hopelessness in regard to the over-

whelming external desolations that had overtaken his beloved country in God's wrath (and he himself a hopeless sufferer in all those calamities), described a personal despair. The prophet could say, after all this most graphic catalogue of his woes, "The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him: to the soul that seeketh Him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. For the Lord will not cast off for ever; but though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. I called upon Thy name, O Lord, out of the low dungeon. Thou hast heard my voice. Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon Thee, thou saidst, Fear not. O Lord, Thou hast pleaded the causes of my soul, Thou hast redeemed my life."

But Cowper's inexorable despair was continually crying, God is against me; I am cut off for ever from the light of the living, from the possibility of His mercy. *Actum est de te; periisti*: My hope is perished from the Lord for ever! And often he was compelled to cry out with the Psalmist, "While I suffer Thy terrors, I am distracted. Thy fierce wrath goeth over me, and Thou hast afflicted me with all Thy waves."

Yet never did Cowper's confidence in God's goodness fail; and even through all this thick spiritual darkness, he was full of gratitude for the providential mercies of his Heavenly Father while reason remained; nor did any Christian ever take greater delight in observing and recounting the footsteps of God's providence, and the marks of His interposing love. He was always ready to say with

Jeremiah, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness."

Moreover, we have seen at the bottom of all Cowper's complaints some remnant still of hope, some persevering conviction, as obstinate as his despair itself, of the possibility that God might yet interpose in his behalf, and deliver him from what would then and thus be demonstrated to have been the affliction of insanity, an imagination of a banishment from God, the work of an unsettled reason under the buffetings of malignant spiritual foes. And we must bear in mind the anxious sincerity and carefulness of Cowper in every expression of his feelings, not to transcend the limits of his own actual experience in any Christian sentiment to which he ever gave utterance.

The exquisite simplicity and transparency of his heart as well as intellect, his freedom from all pretence and guile, and from all affectation of any kind of ability or attainment which he did not possess, are to be remembered in perusing Cowper's letters of sympathy with the sorrows of his dearest friends. When we find him saying in effect, Courage, my brother! we shall soon rejoin our lost one, and many whom we have tenderly loved, "our forerunners into a better country," the consolation is so conveyed that we should feel as if it were almost a deception, if the writer himself were not a partaker of it. Just so, in all those sweet allusions now and then in Cowper's letters to the grounds of a Christian hope; they are so expressed that it is impossible not to feel assured that they do not and can not proceed from a heart that feels as if God were an enemy, or believes that its own sins are not and can

not be forgiven. There is the Christian hope in such expressions, by whatever depths of doubt surrounded. Take, for instance, the close of a letter, in 1791, to the Rev. Walter Bagot. "If God forgive me my sins, surely I shall love Him much, for I have much to be forgiven. But the quantum need not discourage me, since there is One whose atonement can suffice for all."

Again, the record of Christian experience in a letter to the Rev. Mr Hurd, in 1793, is not consistent with the entire absence of hope, but intimates both the possession of a personal faith in the Lord Jesus, and the experience of deep gratitude for the privilege of being permitted to exercise it. Cowper is speaking of the effect of adversity. "Your candid account," says he, "of the effect that your afflictions have, both on your spirits and temper, I can perfectly understand, having laboured much in that fire myself, and perhaps more than any other man. It is in such a school, however, that we must learn, if we ever truly learn it, the natural depravity of the human heart and of our own in particular, together with the consequence that necessarily follows such wretched premises; our indispensable need of the atonement, and our inexpressible obligations to Him who made it. This reflection cannot escape a thinking mind, looking back to those ebullitions of fretfulness and impatience to which it has yielded in a season of great affliction."

Our inexpressible obligations. It is clear that Cowper felt them personally; but how could this have been, had he really and truly believed himself shut out, by a solitary and anomalous decree, from the eternal benefit of the atonement? Here, then, an unacknowledged, and almost

unconscious, yet imperishable hope, contradicted the logic of his despair, as profoundly as his despair itself contradicted the assurances of Scripture and of reason.

"Every proof of attention to a man who lives in a vinegar bottle," said Cowper to his friend Mr Unwin, "is welcome from his friends on the outside of it." Even in this vinegar bottle, Cowper could make merry with the surrounding world, as seen through the prism of his own melancholy. He told Mr Unwin, in this same letter, that he forgave Dr Johnson all the trivial and superstitious dotage in his diary, for the sake of one piece of instruction, namely, *never to banish hope entirely*, because it is the cordial of life, although it be the greatest flatterer in the world. He adds, in regard to his own case, "such a measure of hope as may not endanger my peace by a disappointment, I would wish to cherish upon every subject in which I am interested. A cure, however, and the only one, for all the irregularities of hope and fear, is found in submission to the will of God. Happy they that have it."

He told Newton, during that same year, 1785, that within eight months he had had his hopes, though they had been of short duration, and cut off like the foam upon the waters. "Some previous adjustments, indeed, are necessary, before a lasting expectation of comfort can have place in me. There are persuasions in my mind, which either entirely forbid the entrance of hope, or, if it enter, immediately eject it. They are incompatible with any such inmate, and must be turned out themselves, before so desirable a guest can possibly have secure possession. This, you say, will be done. It may be, but it is

not done yet, nor has a single step in the course of God's dealings with me been taken toward it. If I mend, no creature ever mended so slowly that recovered at last. I am like a slug, or snail, that has fallen into a deep well ; slug as he is, he performs his descent with an alacrity proportioned to his weight ; but he does not crawl up again quite so fast. Mine was a rapid plunge, but my return to daylight, if I am indeed returning, is leisurely enough.

Cowper then beautifully refers to the value which he set upon Newton's letters, and to the circumstances under which the two friends first knew each other. "Your connexion with me was the work of God. The kine that went up with the ark from Bethshemesh left what they loved behind them, in obedience to an impression which to them was perfectly dark and unintelligible. Your journey to Huntingdon was not less wonderful. He, indeed, who sent you, knew well wherefore, but you knew not." He then speaks of his own change under the gloom that had afflicted him, and of the constant affection of his friends. "I can say nothing of myself at present ; but this I can venture to foretell, that should the restoration, of which my friends assure me, obtain, I shall undoubtedly love those who have continued to love me, even in a state of transition from my former self, much more than ever. I doubt not that Nebuchadnezzar had friends in his prosperity ; all kings have many. But when his nails became like eagles' claws, and he ate grass like an ox, I suppose he had few to pity him."

In one of his letters to Mr Rose, in 1783, Cowper apologised at the close of it for the sermonising strain in

which he said he had written it. But he added, "I always follow the leading of my unconstrained thoughts when I write to a friend, be they grave or otherwise." At the beginning of this letter, Cowper excused himself for not answering Mr Rose's epistle sooner, and told him that an unanswered letter troubled his conscience in some degree like a crime, and that he approached him once more in the correspondence not altogether despairing of forgiveness. If this letter had been written to Newton instead of Mr Rose, Southey would probably have taken the opportunity to renew his insinuation that Cowper was always sermonising to Newton, and went to his correspondence with him as unwillingly as if he were going to confession. This letter to Mr Rose is a complete answer to so dishonourable an imputation. Cowper never wrote, never *would* write, under constraint, much less would he sermonise to please others, when his heart did not dictate the strain of remark. His correspondence with Newton is as free and familiar as with any of his friends, and it was always unaffectedly and delightfully easy with them all.

One of his letters to Newton beautifully describes the insupportable irksomeness of a state of confinement or restraint. Other letters equally manifest his independence and frankness, and the indignation with which he could repel a false accusation. "I could not endure the room in which I now write," says he, "were I conscious that the door were locked. In less than five minutes I should feel myself a prisoner, though I can spend hours in it, under an assurance that I may leave it when I please, without experiencing any tedium at all. It was for this reason, I suppose, that the yacht was always disagreeable

to me. I make little doubt but Noah was glad when he was enlarged from the ark ; and we are sure that Jonah was when he came out of the fish ; and so was I to escape from the good sloop Harriet."

All the efforts of Cowper's original genius were spontaneous efforts, and even the translation of Homer was a great work, into which he fell as by accident, while pursuing a mere experiment, and afterward continued it to the end, as a ship by stress of weather must sometimes run before the gale all the way across an ocean, unable to put into a harbour. When he had finished that work, his mind once more reverted frequently and with fondness to the happier employment more congenial with his tastes, and suggested by his inevitable consciousness of renewed poetical power.

Under these circumstances, it was much to be regretted that any new engagements with Milton or Homer should have been laid upon him. While harassed by obligations, which, once assumed, rested with a weight upon his conscience, he felt as if a lasso had been thrown over his genius, and he had become a slave. He longed to be engaged in the work of original poetical composition. "How often do I wish in the course of every day," says he, in a letter to Hayley, in 1792, "that I could be employed once more in poetry, and how often, of course, that this Miltonian trap had never caught me! The year '92 shall stand chronicled in my remembrance as the most melancholy that I have ever known, except the few weeks that I spent at Earham ; and such it has been, principally because, being engaged to Milton, I felt myself no longer free for any other engagement. That ill-fated

work, impracticable in itself, has made every thing else impracticable."

Again, to Hayley, in 1793: "No! I shall neither do nor attempt any thing of consequence more, unless my poor Mary get better; nor even then (unless it should please God to give me another nature) in concert with any man; I could not, even with my own father or brother, were they now alive. Small game must serve me at present, and till I have done with Homer and Milton, a sonnet, or some such matter, must content me. The utmost that I aspire to, and Heaven knows with how feeble a hope, is to write at some better opportunity, and when my hands are free, 'The Four Ages.' Thus have I opened my heart unto thee."

The idea of a poem on the Four Ages, from the first moment of its suggestion, seems to have filled the mind and heart of Cowper with delight. Even beneath the pressure of sorrow and despair, he commenced it in a manner so sublime, and with execution so perfect, that if it had been completed in the same style, it would have been in no respect inferior to "The Task," but probably more profound and grand in thought and imagery. He had a multitude of small pieces, from which he intended to make a selection, and add them to the Four Ages in one volume. Afterward he consented to a proposition of Hayley to unite with him in the authorship of the proposed poem, and the two distinguished artists, Lawrence and Flaxman, were to have furnished the work with the most exquisite possible designs. Cowper told Hayley that if it pleased God to afford him health, spirits, ability, and

leisure, he would not fail to devote them all to the production of his quota of "The Four Ages."

The conception of this poem was suggested to Cowper by the Rev. Mr Buchanan, a clergyman at Ravenstone, near Weston. Having become personally acquainted with Cowper, he wrote to him, in the spring of 1793, such a plan of a proposed poem on the four seasons of human life, infancy, youth, manhood, and old age, that Cowper was filled with admiration, both of the sketch and the subject. Mr Buchanan rightly judged that it would be peculiarly suited to the genius, taste, and piety of Cowper, affording the happiest possible field for the exercise of all his exquisite sensibilities, his powers of imagination, wit, and humour, his playful affections, his early knowledge of the world, his attainments in religion, and the wisdom he had gained from experience. If Lady Austen's suggestion of the *Sofa* could call forth such happy trains of thought, feeling, and imagery from Cowper's mind, what might not have been expected from a proposition fraught with so much thought and beauty, the intimated outlines of which so greatly charmed the poet that he immediately addressed his friendly correspondent the following letter :—

"MY DEAR SIR,—You have sent me a beautiful poem, wanting nothing but meter. I would to Heaven that you would give to it that requisite yourself ; for he who could make the sketch, cannot but be well qualified to finish. But if you will not, I will ; provided always, nevertheless, that God gives me ability, for it will require no common share to do justice to your conceptions."

But Cowper soon began to fear, as he said, "that all his own ages would be exhausted" before he should find leisure to engage in such a composition ; and he regretted more than ever the engagement that had bound him down to Homer and Milton. It was with this feeling, and with sorrow that his powers could not have been employed in work more positively Christian in its character, that he composed the beautiful sonnet to "his kinsman as a son beloved," the Rev. Mr Johnson, who had presented him with a bust of Homer, "the sculptured form of his old favourite bard." It awakened in him both joy and grief.

"The grief is this, that sunk in Homer's mine,
I lose my precious years, now soon to fail!
Handling his gold, which, howsoe'er it shine,
Proves dross when balanced in the Christian scale!
Be wiser, thou ! like our forefather Donne,
Seek heavenly wealth, and work for God alone !"

At a still later date, writing to Hayley, he says, in regard to his promised labours on Milton, he feels like a man who has sprained his wrist, and dreads to use it. "The consciousness that there is so much to do, and nothing done, is a burden I am not able to bear. Milton especially is my grievance, and I might almost as well be haunted by his ghost, as goaded with continual reproaches for neglecting him."

Writing to Hayley, in the spring of 1793, he says—
"Sometimes I am seriously almost crazed with the multiplicity of the matters before me, and the little or no time I have for them ; and sometimes I repose myself after the fatigue of that distraction on the pillar of despair,—a pillow which has often served me in the time of need, and is become, by frequent use, if not very comfortable, at

least convenient. So reposed, I laugh at the world and say, Yes, you may gape, and expect both Homer and Milton from me, but I'll be hanged if ever you get them."

The combination of such tasks with the care of his dear helpless friend, and his extreme anxiety and watchfulness on her account, proved entirely too much for Cowper's nervous system. It was overtasked before he was aware.

Speaking of Mrs Unwin's long-continued watchfulness over Cowper's health, and affectionate ministrations to his comfort, Hayley described, in tender and guarded language, the change produced in her by the effects of paralysis; a change, the contemplation of which, undoubtedly, was one exasperating cause of the final attack of Cowper's malady. Hayley's last visit to Cowper, that could afford any pleasure, was only two months before that attack, and the sight of Mrs Unwin's increasing helplessness, both physical and mental, was very painful, the more so as it was then impossible to withdraw Cowper from the constant care and anxiety which in his turn he endured for her. "Imbecility of body and mind," says Hayley, "must gradually render this tender and heroic woman unfit for the charge which she had so laudably sustained. The signs of such imbecility were beginning to be painfully visible; nor can nature present a spectacle more truly pitiable than imbecility in such a shape, eagerly grasping for dominion, which it knows not either how to retain or how to relinquish."

How Cowper himself felt in the sight of Mrs Unwin's increasing infirmities and helplessness, is made affectingly clear in that most pathetic poem, addressed to her at this time, with the simple title, "To Mary."

" The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast,
Ah, would that this might be the last,
My Mary!

" Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow;
'Twas my distress that brought thee low,
My Mary!

" Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disused, and shine no more,
My Mary!

" For though thou gladly wouldst fulfil
The same kind office for me still,
Thy sight now seconds not thy will,
My Mary!

" But well thou play'dst the housewife's part;
And all thy threads with magic art
Have wound themselves about this heart,
My Mary!

" Thy indistinct expressions seem
Like language utter'd in a dream;
Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme,
My Mary!

" Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light,
My Mary!

" For could I view nor them, nor thee,
What sight worth seeing could I see—
The sun would rise in vain for me,
My Mary!

" Partakers of thy sad decline,
Thy hands their little force resign;
Yet gently press'd, press gently mine,
My Mary!

"Such feebleness of limbs thou prov'st,
That now at every step thou mov'st
Upheld by two;—yet still thou lov'st,
My Mary!

"And still to love, though press'd with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,
My Mary!

"But, ah! by constant heed I know,
How oft the sadness that I shew
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe,
My Mary!

"And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance of the past,
Thy worn-out heart will break at last,
My Mary!"

The year 1792, after his return from his visit to Hayley, was indescribably distressing to him. "In vain," says he, "I pray to be delivered from these distressing experiences; they are only multiplied upon me the more, and the more pointed. I feel myself, in short, the most unpitied, the most unprotected, and the most unacknowledged outcast of the human race." Yet there was one transitory interval of happiness, unspeakably precious, which he noticed in a letter to Newton, as "a manifestation of God's presence vouchsafed to me a few days since; transient, indeed, and dimly seen through a mist of many fears and troubles, but sufficient to convince me, at least, while the Enemy's power is a little restrained, that God has not cast me off for ever."

This interval is described more particularly in a letter to Mr Teedon. "On Saturday, you saw me a little better than I had been when I wrote last; but the night following brought with it an uncommon deluge of distress, such

as entirely overwhelmed and astonished me. My horrors were not to be described. But on Sunday, while I walked with Mrs Unwin and my cousin in the orchard, it pleased God to enable me once more to approach Him in prayer, and I prayed silently for everything that lay nearest my heart with a considerable degree of liberty. Nor did I let slip the occasion of praying for you. This experience I take to be a fulfilment of those words, 'The ear of the Lord is open to them that fear Him, and He will hear their cry.' And ever since I was favoured with that spiritual freedom to make my requests known to God, I have enjoyed some quiet, though not uninterrupted by threatenings of the Enemy."

But still the gloom deepened. Sometimes he described himself, even to Hayley, as "hunted by spiritual hounds in the night season." "Prayer I know is made for me," says he to Mr Newton, "and sometimes with great enlargement of heart by those who offer it; and in this circumstance consists the only evidence I can find, that God is still favourably mindful of me, and has not cast me off for ever." "As to myself, I have always the same song to sing, well in body, but sick in spirit—sick, nigh unto death.

"Seasons return, but not to me returns
God, or the sweet approach of heavenly day,
Or sight of cheering truth, or pardon seal'd,
Or joy, or hope, or Jesus' face divine,
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark."

I could easily set my complaint to Milton's tune, and accompany him through the whole passage, on the subject of a blindness more deplorable than his: but time fails me."

Now we do not know of anything more tenderly affecting

in Cowper's whole history, nor more illustrative of a grateful and affectionate heart, than the interval of hope and prayer above recorded, and the use which Cowper made of it. "*Nor did I let slip the occasion of praying for you.*" Cowper thought that it was in answer to Mr Teedon's earnest interceding prayers, in part at least, that he owed that celestial freedom (and who shall pretend to say that it was not?); and with grateful love he asked God's blessing on his humble benefactor, even amid his own sufferings. It is an exquisitely beautiful proof how truly Cowper's spiritual life was hid with Christ in God, even when he thought it had expired in darkness. If all of Cowper's correspondence with Mr Teedon had been the means of only this incident, and its record, we should rejoice in it as a lovely revelation of Cowper's character, and a sweet evidence of his communion with God, even then, when he thought himself cut off from hope and Heaven. Yet this is the correspondence, and the interchange of prayer, on which Southey thought fit to expend his ridicule; and some have followed in the same strain! Rightly considered, the record is adapted to fill the mind only with admiration and with reverential praise.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Final and fatal recurrence of Cowper's malady—Lady Hesketh's affectionate care—Departure of Cowper and Mrs Unwin from Weston—Mrs Unwin's death—Cowper's letters and terrors—The progress of his despair—Last letter to Newton—Last original composition—The cast-away—Release and deliverance.

IN the year 1794, when the dreadful malady increased upon Cowper with all its early force, his beloved cousin, Lady Hesketh, hastened to his care. She found him in a most deplorable condition, and the description of the circumstances in her letters makes us rather wonder that he had not been sooner and more completely overwhelmed. Mrs Unwin had sunk, after her last attack of the palsy, into second childhood. Hayley says: "The distress of heart that he felt in beholding the cruel change in a companion so justly dear to him, conspiring with his constitutional melancholy, was gradually undermining the exquisite faculties of his mind." He then refers to Lady Hesketh's cheerful and affectionate kindness, as an angel of mercy, "who now devoted herself to the superintendence of a house, whose two interesting inhabitants were rendered, by age and trouble, almost incapable of attending to the ordinary offices of life. Those only who have lived with the superannuated and the melancholy can properly

appreciate the value of such magnanimous friendship, or perfectly apprehend what personal sufferings it must cost a frame of compassionate sensibility."

Lady Hesketh, after noting that this last interval of Cowper's dreadful dejection began in the month of which he always lived in terror, that of January, says that she found him on her arrival "the absolute *nurse* of this poor lady Mrs Unwin, who cannot move out of her chair without help, nor walk across the room unless supported by two people; added to this, her voice is almost wholly unintelligible; and as their house was repairing all summer, he was reduced, poor soul, for many months, *to have no conversation but hers*. You must imagine, sir, that his situation was terrible indeed; and the more, as he was deprived, by means of this poor lady, of all his wonted exercises, both mental and bodily, as she did not choose he should leave her for a moment, or use a pen, or a book except when he read *to her*, which is an employment that always, I know, fatigues and hurts him, and which therefore my arrival relieved him from. I thought him, on the whole, better than I expected he would have been *in such a situation*."

In another letter, Lady Hesketh described the increasing force of Cowper's malady, and the terrors that were gathering around him. "He is now come to expect daily, and even hourly, that he shall be carried away;—and he kept in his room from the time breakfast was over till four o'clock on Sunday last, in spite of repeated messages from Mrs Unwin, because he was afraid somebody would take possession of his bed, and prevent his lying down on it any more!"

In July 1795, Cowper and Mrs Unwin were both re-

moved from Weston to North Tuddenham, under the affectionate care of Mr Johnson, and from thence, in August, to Mundesley, on the coast of Norfolk. While at Tuddenham, Cowper and Johnson walked over together to the village of Mattishall, on a visit to Mrs Bodham, the poet's cousin. Cowper's own portrait by Abbot was there, taken at Weston in July 1792, when Cowper and Mrs Unwin were on the eve of their journey to Mr Hayley's at Eartham. He was then filled with trembling apprehensions on her account, and beginning to be harassed with a thousand anxieties about the pilgrimage of a hundred and twelve miles; hunted, as he told Hayley, by spiritual hounds in the night season, and scared with dreaming visions more terrific than ever. Yet nothing of such terror was imprinted by day upon his mild and pensive countenance, and the portrait by Abbot was a most successful effort. Every creature that saw it was astonished at the resemblance. Cowper wrote Hayley that Sam's boy bowed to it; and Beau, his dog, walked up to it, wagging his tail as he went, and evidently shewing that he acknowledged its likeness to his master.

Now it is a most impressive sign of the acuteness of Cowper's mental distress, that, notwithstanding the sadness and dejection of his state when this picture was taken, it was, by comparison with his present darkness and despair, a season of most enviable light and enjoyment. When his gaze rested on the portrait at Mrs Bodham's house, he clasped his hands, according to Hayley's account, in a paroxysm of pain, and uttered a vehement wish that his present sensations might be such as they were when that picture was painted!

While at Mundesley, Cowper wrote a single letter to Mr Buchanan, the only effort he had been able to make, even in epistolary correspondence with his dearest friends (except Lady Hesketh) for a considerable interval. He longed to hear something from his beloved home at Weston, and closed his letter with a request, most tenderly illustrating the strength of his home-affections and sensibilities. "Tell me if my poor birds are living! I never see the herbs I used to give them without a recollection of them, and sometimes am ready to gather them, forgetting that I am not at home."

In 1796, the two invalids resided with Mr Johnson at Dunham Lodge, whence in September they again visited the sea-side at Mundesley, but in October retired to Mr Johnson's house in Dunham for the winter. There Mrs Unwin died, at the age of seventy-two; but the extreme depression of spirits produced by Cowper's malady prevented him entirely from the experience of that distress and anguish, with which such an event would, in a state of health and hope, have overwhelmed him. From the day of her death he never mentioned her name, and seemed not even to retain the remembrance of such a person ever having existed. He continued under the same depression through the year 1797, but was persuaded, by the affectionate and winning entreaties of his young kinsman, to renew his labours on the revisal of his *Homer*, notwithstanding the pressure of his malady. The year 1798 passed away with but little variation in his state, and by the 8th of March 1799, he had completed the revisal of the *Odyssey*, and the next morning wrote part of a new preface. But this was his last continuous intellec-

tual effort, although he wrote one or two gloomy letters, and one more original poem.

The perusal of the letters (few, and despairing even to incoherence) which he wrote to Lady Hesketh, from 1795 to 1798, fills the mind with amazement that he could in such a state apply himself to any intellectual occupation. We also admire, with Hayley, the tender and ingenious assiduity of Cowper's young kinsman, under whose care these melancholy years were passed, that could engage in such effort a being so hopelessly depressed. "Even a stranger may consider it a strong proof of his tender dexterity in soothing and guiding the afflicted poet, that he was able to engage him steadily to pursue and finish the revisal and correction of his *Homer* during a long period of bodily and mental sufferings, when his troubled mind recoiled from all intercourse with his most intimate friends, and laboured under a morbid abhorrence of all cheerful exertion."

These letters to Lady Hesketh also let us into the knowledge of sufferings which Cowper never described, nor attempted to recount to any mortal in the former attacks of his distressing malady. Those attacks had been so sudden and so overwhelming, that he could not put pen to paper, nor indeed endure any communication, even with his dearest friends, and he never could bring himself to any detail of what he passed through. But this final attack was more gradual, and was not so absolute—did not so entirely plunge him beyond the reach of any sympathetic voice; and the few letters he undertook to Lady Hesketh really do more than any thing else toward un-

veiling the entanglement of infernal delusions, that lay like knotted snakes at the bottom of those depths down which his afflicted reason had been flung.

The first of these sad and singular records was at Mundesley, where by the sea-shore Cowper had loved to wander in his earlier days, and had expressed to his friends the sublime impressions produced by the sight of the ocean, and the softly soothing melancholy into which the sound of the breaking billows had often composed his thoughts. But now the wildest storm upon the sea was rapture in comparison with the anguish and desolating apprehensions that filled his soul. "The most forlorn of beings," says he, "I tread a shore under the burden of infinite despair that I once trod all cheerfulness and joy. I view every vessel that approaches the coast with an eye of jealousy and fear, lest it arrive with a commission to seize me. But my insensibility, which you say is a mystery to you, because it seems incompatible with such fear, has the effect of courage, and enables me to go forth, as if on purpose to place myself in the way of danger. The cliff is here of a height that it is terrible to look down from; and yesterday evening, by moonlight, I paused sometimes within a foot of the edge of it, from which to have fallen would probably have been to be dashed in pieces. But though to have been dashed in pieces, would perhaps have been best for me, I shrunk from the precipice, and am waiting to be dashed in pieces by other means. At two miles' distance on the coast is a solitary pillar of rock, that the crumbling cliff has left at the high-water mark. I have visited it twice, and have found it an emblem of

myself. Torn from my natural connexions, I stand alone, and expect the storm that shall displace me.

"I have no expectation that I shall ever see you more, though Samuel assures me that I shall visit Weston again, and that you will meet me there. My terrors, when I left it, would not permit me to say, Farewell, for ever—which now I do; wishing, but vainly wishing, to see you yet once more, and equally wishing that I could now as confidently, and as warmly as once I could, subscribe myself affectionately yours; but every feeling that could warrant the doing it, has, as you too well know, long since forsaken the bosom of

"W. C."

This was written in August 1795. In September there is a renewal of the same despairing monody, and an evident perplexity of mind in vainly striving to penetrate the mystery of his fate, which it is truly affecting to witness. "I shall never see Weston more. I have been tossed like a ball into a far country, for which there is no rebound for me. There, indeed, I lived a life of infinite despair, and such is my life in Norfolk. Such, indeed, it would be in any given spot upon the face of the globe; but to have passed the little time that remained to me there, was the desire of my heart. My heart's desire, however, has been always frustrated in every thing that it ever settled on, and by means that have rendered my disappointments inevitable. When I left Weston, I despaired of reaching Norfolk, and now that I have reached Norfolk, I am equally hopeless of ever reaching Weston more. What a lot is mine! Why was existence given to a creature that might possibly, and would probably become wretched in

the degree that I have been so? and whom misery such as mine was almost sure to overwhelm in a moment. But the question is vain. I existed by a decree from which there was no appeal, and on terms the most tremendous, because unknown to, and even unsuspected by me; difficult to be complied with, had they been foreknown, and unforeknown, impracticable. Of this truth I have no witness but my own experience; a witness whose testimony will not be admitted. . . . I remain the forlorn and miserable being I was when I wrote last."

A few months after this letter, he has evidently, in January 1796, gone down a few fathoms deeper in this tremendous gloom. Yet the manner in which he writes concerning these experiences has something in it, notwithstanding his assertion of the certainty of his dreadful doom, like the air of one who half suspects himself of being in a trance or dream. It is at least so far unreal, that he perplexes himself about it; and every advance into a deeper darkness makes him perceive that in the preceding darkness there was light. The idea that Lady Hesketh has described in one of her letters as possessing him, that he was to be suddenly and bodily carried away to a place of torment, haunted him more and more; it was but the more definite converging and concentration of that indefinable, anxious, and ominous foreboding of the future, under which he had so often described himself to Newton and other dear friends, in deeply interesting letters, as borne down beneath a weight of apprehension that almost rendered life intolerable. "I seem to myself," he said to Newton, in 1792, "to be scrambling always in the dark, among rocks and precipices, without a guide, but with

an enemy ever at my heels prepared to push me headlong."

So long as the delusion was general, Cowper was sane, though beneath such a weight of suffering from the slow nervous and mental fever of his gloom. But in proportion as the delusion took a definite form, his reason gave way before it, though his senses were continued to him, only, as he imagined, that he might look forward to the worst. We see the process of his insanity in these letters with a terrible distinctness; he himself the victim, describing the symptoms and experiences step after step, till he can write no more, till we lose sight of him in the darkness, and can only imagine, what more than is related, his sensitive nature may have suffered, before the Redeemer, who was always with him, gave him an eternal deliverance. What David, amid the distraction of his terrors, could say, was not less true of Cowper, even when despair was too absolute to admit of his believing the consolation, "When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then Thou knewest my path!"

He says to Lady Hesketh, under date of January 22d, 1796: "I have become daily and hourly worse ever since I left Mundeley; then I had something like a gleam of hope allowed me, that possibly my life might be granted to me for a longer time than I had been used to suppose, though only on the dreadful terms of accumulating future misery on myself, and for no other reason; but even that hope has long since forsaken me, and I now consider this letter as the warrant of my own dreadful end—as the fulfilment of a word heard in better days, at least six-and-twenty years ago. A word which, to have understood at

the time when it reached me, would have been, at least might have been, a happiness indeed to me ; but my cruel destiny denied me the privilege of understanding any thing that, in the horrible moment came winged with my immediate destruction, might have served to aid me. You know my story far better than I am able to relate it. Infinite despair is a sad prompter. I expect that in six days' time, at the latest, I shall no longer foresee, but feel, the accomplishment of all my fears. Oh, lot of unexampled misery incurred in a moment ! Oh, wretch ! to whom death and life are alike impossible ! Most miserable at present in this, that being thus miserable, I have my senses continued to me, only that I may look forward to the worst. It is certain, at least, that I have them for no other purpose, and but very imperfectly, even for this ! My thoughts are like loose and dry sand, which, the closer it is grasped, slips the sooner away. Mr Johnson reads to me, but I lose every other sentence through the inevitable wanderings of my mind, and experience, as I have these two years, the same shattered mode of thinking on every subject, and on all occasions. If I seem to write with more connexion, it is only because the gaps do not appear. Adieu !—I shall not be here to receive your answer, neither shall I ever see you more. Such is the expectation of the most desperate and most miserable of all beings."

Now, if the readers of this letter will turn back to the description given of Cowper's state in his first dread conflict bordering on insanity, when he wished for madness as a relief, from what, to him, seemed the worse misery of the dreaded public examination, for which he knew himself to be unfitted, there will be found a singular

analogy between this latter crisis of Cowper's malady and the first. The cycle seemed to have been run, and he had come round to the point where he started. In both cases, he seemed to himself to have possession of his senses, only that he might know and calculate more certainly his coming doom. But in the first case, there was no awakened and regenerated conscience; and under the pressure of his misery, he rushed madly to the purpose of self-destruction, bracing himself against whatever he might meet in the future world. Then, when conscience was roused and goaded into fury by the frustrated attempt at self-murder, it was her scorpion sting that inflicted the misery, and produced the gloom, in which he was buried till the face of Christ was revealed to him, and he received grace to believe.

But into the last crisis and conflict the element of an angry conscience did not once enter, nor of a rebellious will. He lay as still and submissive as a weaned child, though the subject at the same time of such dreadful despair, and of such distorting and maddening delusions about the purposes of God in regard to him. If language like the outcries of Job sometimes gave utterance to his passionate grief, and he was almost ready to curse his day, yet he never questioned God's righteousness; nay, at times the very madness of the insanity was in this imagination, that God's truth and righteousness required his destruction. It is singularly interesting to compare the two extremes: the first, when he entered into his insanity from a careless and impenitent heart, and irreligious life; the last, when from a life of faith, patience, submission, meekness, prayer, and incessant effort after God, and with a conscience

beyond question sprinkled by atoning blood, he went down for the last time into the same dreadful chaos and gloom, unirradiated by one gleam of hope, yet on the very verge of heaven, immediately to emerge into its eternal light and glory !

Under date of February 19, 1796, Cowper again wrote to Lady Hesketh, in the same strain. " Could I address you as I used to do, with what delight should I begin this letter ! But that delight, and every other sensation of the kind, has long since forsaken me for ever. . . . All my themes of misery may be summed in one word. He who made me, regrets that ever He did. Many years have passed since I learned this terrible truth from Himself, and the interval has been spent accordingly. Adieu—I shall write to you no more. I am promised months of continuance here, and should be somewhat less a wretch in my present feelings could I credit the promise, but effectual care is taken that I shall not. The night contradicts the day, and I go down the torrent of time into the gulf that I have expected to plunge into so long. A few hours remain, but among those few, not one is found, a part of which I shall ever employ in writing to you again. Once more, therefore, adieu, and adieu to the pen for ever. I suppress a thousand agonies, to add only,

" W. C."

It is a most affecting picture which is given at this time of Cowper's desolate and trembling state, and of the fearful apprehensions that beset him, by his kinsman Mr Johnson, when he tells us that " the tender spirit of Cowper clung exceedingly to those about him, and seemed to

be haunted with a continual dread that they would leave him alone in his solitary mansion. Sunday, therefore, was a day of more than ordinary apprehension to him, as the furthest of his kinsman's churches being fifteen miles from the Lodge, he was necessarily absent during the whole of the Sabbath. On these occasions, it was the constant practice of the dejected poet to listen frequently on the steps of the hall-door for the barking of dogs at a farmhouse, which, in the stillness of the night, though at nearly the distance of two miles, invariably announced the approach of his companion."

Once again, in 1797, Cowper wrote a few lines to Lady Hesketh. "To you once more," says he, "and too well I know why, I am under cruel necessity of writing. Every line that I have ever sent you, I have believed, under the influence of infinite despair, the last that I should ever send. This I know to be so. Whatever be your condition, either now or hereafter, it is heavenly compared with mine, even at this moment. It is unnecessary to add that this comes from the most miserable of beings, whom a terrible minute made such." The post-mark of this letter was May 15, 1797, but there was neither date nor signature, a picture of the painful confusion, and almost chaos, of the poet's suffering mind. Indeed, these letters disclose, by glimpses, the distraction and misery of the writer, just as the flashes of lightning over the sea, in a dark and stormy night, might reveal the form of a dismasted ship driving wrecked before the tempest.

There were three similar letters in 1798, in the second of which, speaking of the *universal blank* that even nature had become to him, though once he was susceptible of so

much pleasure from the delightful scenes Lady Hesketh had been describing, he says, "My state of mind is a medium through which the beauties of Paradise itself could not be communicated with any effect but a painful one."

In the third, and last he ever wrote to her, in December 1798, he was in full possession of his faculties, except for the weight of the mountain of his despair, yet wrote under the idea that all his volitions and actions were the result of an inevitable and eternal necessity. He described himself as giving all his miserable days, and no small portion of his nights also, to the revisal of his Homer ; a hopeless employment, he said, on every account, both because he himself was hopeless while engaged in it, and because, with all his labour, it was impossible to do justice to the antique original in a modern language. "That, under such disabling circumstances, and in despair both of myself and of my work, I should yet attend to it, and even feel something like a wish to improve it, would be unintelligible to me, if I did not know that my volitions, and consequently my actions, are under a perpetual, irresistible influence. Whatever they were in the earlier part of my life, that such they are now is with me a matter of every day's experience. This doctrine I once denied, and even now assert the truth of it respecting myself only. *There can be no peace where there is no freedom*; and he is a wretch indeed who is a necessitarian by experience."

There can be no peace where there is no freedom ! How did this truth spring up from the deepest depth in Cowper's heart ! How it reminds us, wrung as its expression here is from his own anguish, of those exquisitely beautiful

and noble sentiments, manifestly the sincerest utterances of his soul, with which, in "The Task," he has denounced the curse of slavery, and celebrated freedom as man's birth-right from his Creator!

" Whose freedom is by sufferance, and at will
Of a superior, he is never free.
Who lives, and is not weary of a life
Exposed to manacles, deserves them well.
The State that strives for liberty, though foll'd,
And forced to abandon what she bravely sought,
Deserves, at least, applause for her attempt,
And pity for her loss. But that's a cause
Not often unsuccessful. Power usurp'd
Is weakness when opposed, conscious of wrong,
'Tis pusillanimous, and prone to flight;
But slaves that once conceive the glowing thought
Of freedom, in that hope itself possess
All that the contest calls for; spirit, strength,
The scorn of danger, and united hearts,
The surest presage of the good they seek.
" 'Tis liberty alone that gives the flower
Of fleeting life its lustre and perfume;
And we are weeds without it. All constraint,
Except what wisdom lays on evil men,
Is evil: hurts the faculties, impedes
Their progress in the road of science; blinds
The eyesight of discovery; and begets
In those that suffer it a sordid mind,
Bestial, a meagre intellect, unfit
To be the tenant of man's noble form."

The coincidences between Cowper's poetry and his letters are interesting and instructive in the extreme; and the more so, because he never thought of them, and never repeated himself, but always wrote what was the original creation of a present experience.

The last letter of his life was written to the dearest Christian friend he had ever known, John Newton, thank-

ing him for his own last letter, and for a book which Newton had sent him, and which Mr Johnson had just read to him. How sad and dark were his last words to that dear friend, whom he was just on the eve of meeting and welcoming in the rapture and glory of a world of eternal happiness and light ! It was dated April 11, 1799, and he says, "If the book afforded me any amusement, or suggested to me any reflections, they were only such as served to embitter, if possible, still more the present moment by a sad retrospect of those days when I thought myself secure of an eternity, to be spent with the spirits of such men as he whose life afforded the subject of it. But I was little aware of what I had to expect, and that a storm was at hand, which in one terrible moment would darken, and in another still more terrible blot out, that prospect for ever. Adieu, dear sir, whom in those days I called dear friend with feelings that justified the appellation."

At this time, Cowper had just finished the final revisal of his *Homer*, and could converse in regard to other literary undertakings, for the vigour of his mind was unabated, nor had the power of his imagination, nor the tenderness and sensibility of his affections, been diminished by his gloom. His affectionate kinsman proposed to him to continue his poem on "The Four Ages," and accordingly he altered and added a few lines, but remarked "that it was too great a work for him to attempt in his present situation." The next day he wrote in Latin verse the poem entitled "The Ice Islands," and a few days afterwards translated it into English. The day after that translation, the 20th of March, he wrote the last original poem he ever composed,—those most affecting stanzas, entitled "The Castaway,"—founded

upon an occurrence related in Anson's "Voyages," which he had remembered for many years.

"Obscurest night involved the sky,
Th' Atlantic billows roar'd,
When such a destined wretch as I,
Wash'd headlong from on board,
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.

"No braver chief could Albion boast,
Than he with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albion's coast,
With warmer wishes sent.
He loved them both, but both in vain,
Nor him beheld, nor her again.

"Not long beneath the whelming brine,
Expert to swim, he lay ;
Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
Or courage die away ;
But waged with death a lasting strife,
Supported by despair of life.

"He shouted : nor his friends had fall'd
To check the vessel's course,
But so the furious blast prevail'd,
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

"Some succour yet they could afford ;
And, such as storms allow,
The cask, the coop, the floated cord,
Delayed not to bestow ;
But he (they knew) not ship, nor shore,
Whate'er they gave, should visit more.

"Nor, cruel as it seem'd, could he
Their haste himself condemn,
Aware that flight, in such a sea,
Alone could rescue them ;
Yet bitter felt it still to die,
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

"He long survives, who lives an hour
In ocean, self-upheld ;
And so long he, with unspent power,
His destiny repell'd.
And ever, as the minutes flew,
Entreated help, or cried—Adieu.

"At length, his transient respite pass'd,
His comrades, who before
Had heard his voice in every blast,
Could catch the sound no more.
For them, by toil subdued, he drank
The stifling wave, and then he sank.

"No poet wept him, but the page
Of narrative sincere,
That tells his name, his worth, his age,
Is wet with Anson's tear.
And tears by bards or heroes shed,
Alike immortalise the dead.

"I therefore purpose not, or dream,
Descanting on his fate,
To give the melancholy theme
A more enduring date ;
But misery still delights to trace
Its semblance in another's case.

"No voice Divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone ;
When, snatch'd from all effectual air,
We perish'd, each alone :
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he."

This was his last poem, and his last attempt at poetry, though, as late as January 1800, he employed himself in translating some of Gay's Fables into Latin verse. The regret has often been expressed, as it was in his life-time, that his great powers should not have been given to some other original poetical undertaking rather than employed for so many years in the translation of Homer. But he

had accomplished enough for one poet in the composition of "The Task." What God sees fit to do in the discipline of the human mind by poetry, He evidently does sparingly. And, indeed, if the quantity were greater, the value would be less, and the effect would be diminished. It is like the precious metals for the coin of society; abundance would destroy their use. So Divine Providence in every age limits and regulates the supply of poets and of poetry in the world. Another poem like the last might have been produced, but the effect of both together would perhaps not have been so great as that of Cowper's volume alone.

When Cowper wrote "The Castaway," he was in reality, as to time, just on the verge of heaven; the day of his deliverance was drawing nigh. Nevertheless, up to the last hour his mind remained in deep, unbroken gloom. In March, the physician in Norwich being requested to see him, asked him how he felt? "Feel!" said Cowper, "I feel unutterable despair!" The 19th of April, Mr Johnson, "apprehending that his death was near, adverted to the affliction, both of body and mind, which Cowper was enduring, and ventured to speak of his approaching dissolution as the signal of his deliverance. After a pause of a few moments, less interrupted by the objections of his desponding relative than he had dared to hope, he proceeded to an observation more consolatory still; namely, that in the world to which he was hastening, a merciful Redeemer had prepared inexpressible happiness for all His children; and therefore for him. To the first part of this sentence, Cowper had listened with composure; but the concluding words were no sooner uttered, than his passionately-expressed entreaties that his companion would desist

from any further observations of a similar kind, clearly proved that, though it was on the eve of being invested with angelic light, the darkness of delusion still veiled his spirit." He died as calmly as a sleeping infant, on the afternoon of the 25th of April 1800 ; and from that moment the expression into which the countenance settled was observed by his loving relative "to be that of calmness and composure, mingled, as it were, with holy surprise ;" and he regarded this as an index of the last thoughts and enjoyments of his soul, in its gradual escape from the depths of that inscrutable despair in which it had been so long shrouded.

CHAPTER XXX.

Missionary speech by Dr Duff—Sphere of Cowper's usefulness—Cowper's own review of his early life—Providence and grace in it—Cowper's admirable criticisms—Hymns for the parish clerk—Advice in regard to study.

It is a sweet thing to behold how the words of poets passed into the skies, become the resort of Christian hearts for the utterance of their deepest and holiest feelings. This is the case, above all others, with the poetry of Watts and Cowper. How many souls have they been permitted to accompany, and even to persuade and allure to the mercy-seat, and to interpret the breathings of how many hearts, in their nearest approaches to God on earth, and on the solemn verge of death, and almost in their very entrance to heaven ! And yet, through how much suffering, in the instance of Cowper's genius, was this great privilege accorded ! And with what ineffable delight must such beatified minds look down from amid their part in the anthems of heaven, to behold assemblages of saints on earth adoring and praising God through the instrumentality of their compositions ! We thought of Cowper, and his earthly gloom and desolation, and his rapture in the world of light and glory, on occasion of one of those vast and crowded gatherings, when the missionary Dr Duff

poured forth the fervour of his Christian eloquence. At the close of one of his last speeches in America, on occasion of the meeting of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, his mind had been wrought up to such a point of excited feeling, and climacteric agglomeration of thought, sentences, and images, that by the very law of evolution he was forced to go higher and higher with each successive sentence, till an almost painful feeling of wonder and anxiety was produced in almost every mind—how can he end? how can he close? how descend from such an elevation, or how continue his soaring? There was but one page in one poem in the world that could have given him the means, and that was in the sixth book of "The Task;" and it was as if Cowper himself, as a guardian angel, had borne him on his wings, and lighted with him from his transcendent flight. He closed his thrilling address, and its unrivalled climax, with those magnificent lines—

"One song employs all nations, and all cry,
Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain for us!
The dwellers in the vales and in the rocks
Shout to each other, and the mountain-tops
From distant mountains catch the flying joy,
Till, nation after nation taught the strain,
Earth rolls the rapturous Hosannah round!"

If our recollection does not mislead us, we believe the speaker repeated the last line three times, swinging his long arm at each exulting repetition, with an accompanying sweep of grandeur—

"Earth rolls the rapturous Hosannah round!
Earth rolls the rapturous Hosannah round!
Earth rolls the rapturous Hosannah round!"

The effect was sublime, overwhelming, and it seemed as if the vast audience would break forth into the same shout simultaneously !

At one time, Cowper was seriously questioning whether he ought not to devote himself to the ministry of the gospel ; but the case was soon made perfectly plain to his own mind, as indeed it was afterwards to all. His sphere of labour and of usefulness had been determined by Divine Providence, and the ruin of all his own schemes, was just a necessary part of that discipline by which God would prepare him for the dominion he was to hold, by his genius and piety, in men's minds and affections. It was a much wider dominion than he ever could have gained in sacred orders ; a dominion *over* the Church which indeed he could never have obtained as a minister in and of the Church. He knew this, and sometimes playfully intimated as much to Lady Hesketh, as when he heard from her that a certain duchess was interesting herself in his behalf. "Who in the world," exclaims he, "set the Duchess of —— a-going ? But if all the duchesses in the world were spinning, like so many whirligigs, for my benefit, I would not stop them. It is a noble thing to be a poet, it makes all the world so lively. I might have preached more sermons than even Tillotson did, and better, and the world would have been still fast asleep ; but a volume of verse is a fiddle that puts the universe in motion."

Cowper sometimes thought it was his over-sensitive shyness that ruined him, in preventing him from succeeding at the bar. He sympathised much with his young friends, Johnson and Rose, when he saw in them something of the same awkward timidity. The advice he gave them

both was excellent, especially to Rose. "I pitied you," says he, "for the fears which deprived you of your uncle's company, and the more for having suffered so much by those fears myself. Fight against that vicious fear, for such it is, as strenuously as you can. It is the worst enemy that can attack a man destined to the forum ;—it ruined me. To associate as much as possible with the most respectable company for good sense and good breeding, is, I believe, the only, at least I am sure it is the best remedy. *The society of men of pleasure will not cure it, but rather leaves us more exposed to its influence in company of better persons.*"

The ruin of Cowper as a lawyer, politician, and man of the world, was the making of him as a poet and a useful being, but only by the intervention of Divine grace. Without this, he would have been ruined indeed. And in a beautiful letter he commends the same dear young friend for his diligence in the study of the law. "You do well, my dear sir, to improve your opportunity ; to speak in a rural phrase, this is your sowing-time, and the sheaves you look for can never be yours, unless you make that use of it. The colour of our whole life is generally such as the three or four first years in which we are our own masters, make it. Then it is that we may be said to shape our own destiny, and to treasure up for ourselves a series of future successes or disappointments. Had I employed my time as wisely as you, in a situation very similar to yours, I had never been a poet perhaps, but I might by this time have acquired a character of more importance in society, and a situation in which my friends would have been better pleased to see me. But three years misspent in an at-

torney's office, were almost of course followed by several more, equally misspent in the Temple, and the consequence has been, as the Italian epitaph says, *Sto qui*. The only use I can make of myself now, at least the best, is to serve *in terrorem* to others, when occasion may happen to offer, that they may escape (so far as my admonitions can have any weight with them) my folly and my fate. When you feel yourself tempted to relax a little of the strictness of your present discipline, and to indulge in amusement incompatible with your future interests, think on your friend at Weston."

Cowper's letters contain some of the finest passages of instructive criticism in the English language. Of this character are his remarks on occasion of one of his own poetical lines having been tampered with to make it smoother.

"I know," says he, "that the ears of modern verse-writers are delicate to an excess, and their readers are troubled with the same squeamishness as themselves, so that if a line do not run as smooth as quicksilver, they are offended. A critic of the present day serves a poem as a cook serves a dead turkey, when she fastens the legs of it to a post, and draws out all the sinews. For this we may thank Pope; but unless we could imitate him in the closeness and compactness of his expression, as well as in the smoothness of his numbers, we had better drop the imitation, which serves no other purpose than to emasculate and weaken all we write. Give me a manly, rough line, with a deal of meaning in it, rather than a whole poem full of musical periods, that have nothing but their oily smoothness to recommend them.

“There is a roughness on a plum which nobody that understands fruit would rub off, though the plum would be much more polished without it. I wish you to guard me from all such meddling ; assuring you that I always write as smoothly as I can, but that I never did, never will, sacrifice the spirit or sense of a passage to the sound of it.”

The power and charm of Cowper's good sense and simplicity, as well as tenderness of feeling, in his poetry, were acknowledged in a very unexpected way, when the clerk of All-Saints' parish, in Northampton, came to him with a renewed application for the annual mortuary stanzas to be printed with his bill of mortality at Christmas. Cowper told him there must be plenty of poets at Northampton, and referred him, in particular, to his namesake Mr Cox, the statuary, as a successful wooer of the Muse. The clerk made answer, that all this was very true, and he had already borrowed help from him. “But, alas ! sir, Mr Cox is a gentleman of much reading, and the people of our town do not well understand him. He has written for me, but nine in ten of us were stone-blind to his meaning.” Cowper felt all the force of this equivocal compliment ; his mortified vanity came near refusing, if the merit of his own verses was considered as insured by the *smallness* of his reading. But finding that the poor clerk had walked over to Weston on purpose to implore his assistance, and was in considerable distress, he good-naturedly consented, and supplied the clerk's mortality bill with his beautiful verses for several years. “A fig for the poets,” said he, “who write epitaphs upon individuals ! I have written *one* that serves *two hundred* persons.” Among these productions is to be found the beautiful dirge, beginning—

"Thankless for favours from on high,
 Man thinks he fades too soon ;
 Though 'tis his privilege to die,
 Would he improve the boon."

The last verse in this poem is truly sublime ; and it is one of the most perfect stanzas, taking into consideration the greatness and compactness of thought expressed, and the dignity and simplicity of the expression, that even Cowper ever wrote—

"'Tis judgment shakes him : there's the fear
 That prompts the wish to stay ;
 He has incurr'd a long arrears,
 And must despair to pay.

"*Pay* ? follow Christ, and all is paid ;
 His death your peace insures ;
 Think on the grave where *He* was laid,
 And calm descend to *yours*."

Another of these pieces is that beginning—

"O most delightful hour by man
 Experienced here below,
 The hour that terminates his span,
 His folly and his woe !"

That also beginning—

"He lives, who lives to God alone,
 And all are dead beside ;
 For other source than God is none,
 Whence life can be supplied."

This last was composed in 1793 ; and it is somewhat strange that the critics who deemed it so hazardous to the verge of insanity for Cowper to have been engaged by Newton in composing the Olney Hymns, should not have

fallen upon poor John Cox, the parish clerk of Northampton, for the pertinacity with which he enlisted the genius and the heart of the poet again in so dangerous an undertaking.

One of Cowper's apothegms to his young friend and kinsman, Mr Johnson, deserves quoting; because, although simplicity and perspicuity were in Cowper the intuition and native element of his genius, yet he also made it a *principle*, both of intellect and conscience. "Remember," said he, "that in writing, perspicuity is always more than half the battle; the want of it is the ruin of more than half the poetry that is published. A meaning that does not stare you in the face is as bad as no meaning, because nobody will take the pains to poke for it."

We may add here the admirable advice given by Cowper in another letter to the same young friend, in regard to his course of study: "Life is too short to afford time even for serious trifles. Pursue what you know to be attainable, make truth your object, and your studies will make you a wise man. Let your divinity, if I may advise, be the divinity of the glorious Reformation; I mean, in contradiction to Arminianism, and all the *isms* that ever were broached in this world of error and ignorance. The divinity of the Reformation is called Calvinism, but injuriously. It has been that of the Church of Christ in all ages. It is the divinity of St Paul, and of St Paul's Master, who met him in his way to Damascus."

Cowper's own religious views, as well as Newton's, were what are called Calvinistic; but he meant that *any* nomenclature except that of Christ, given to the divinity of the Reformation, was injurious. That divinity rose above

all names, went back of all Churches, and was taken immediately from the Scriptures.

What Cowper practised in himself, and what grew out of the very instinct and life of his character, he loved in others. He told Newton that he preferred his style as a historian (referring to Newton's excellent work on the early history of the Church), to that of the two most renowned writers of history the present day has seen. He referred, not to Hume, whose style was more simple, and whose volumes were not then all published, but to Robertson and Gibbon. He gave his reasons for this preference, with his own point and beauty: "In your style I see no affectation—in every line of theirs I see nothing else. They disgust me always; Robertson with his pomp and his strut, and Gibbon with his finical and French manners. You are as correct as they. You express yourself with as much precision. Your words are arranged with as much propriety, but you do not set your periods to a tune. They discover a perpetual desire to exhibit themselves to advantage; whereas your subject engrosses you. They *sing*, and you *say*; which, as history is a thing to be said, and not sung, is in my judgment very much to your advantage. A writer that despises their tricks, and is yet neither inelegant nor inharmonious, proves himself, by that single circumstance, a man of superior judgment and ability to them both. You have my reasons. I honour a manly character, in which good sense and a desire of doing good are the predominant features; but affectation is an emetic."

Hayley, one of the dearest friends, and the first biographer of Cowper, has connected his own fame with that

of the poet by this friendship. It gives him an immortality which his own poetical works, though of no little excellence, could not have secured for him. His admiration and love of Cowper were heartfelt and unbounded ; but he did not exaggerate when he pronounced "The Task," "taken altogether, perhaps the most attractive poem that was ever produced, and such as required the rarest assemblage of truly poetical powers for its production." "Sweet bard !" exclaimed one of Hayley's correspondents, who never had enjoyed the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with the poet, but whose heart was inspired with the deepest Christian affection, contemplating Cowper's portrait by Lawrence :—

"Sweet bard ! with whom in sympathy of choice
I've oftentimes left the world at nature's voice,
To join the song that all her creatures raise,
To carol forth their great Creator's praise ;
Or wrapt in visions of immortal day,
Have gazed on Truth in Zion's heavenly way ;
Sweet bard ! may this thine image, all I know,
Or ever may, of Cowper's form below,
Teach one, who views it with a Christian's love,
To seek and find thee in the realms above !"

THE END.

